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BoatShop launches Maritime Mentorship Program

April 15, 2015

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FOR GIG HARBOR LIFE

Over the past five years, the Gig Harbor BoatShop has been lauded by the U.S. Department of the Interior, Washington State historic preservation specialists and the Center for Wooden Boats for its work building, restoring and documenting historic watercraft.

Recently, the BoatShop launched a new Maritime Mentorship Program that pairs master craftsmen with college-age interns in a hands-on learning experience in bringing vintage boats back to life.

The first mentorship project, which began in early April, is rebuilding a 1964 Chris-Craft Super Sport runabout. Master boat-restorer Bruce Bronson is leading the project. Gig Harbor resident Megan Winther is the program's first intern.

According to BoatShop Executive Director Guy Hoppen, the Marine Mentorship Program is a way that skilled craftsmen can pass down their skills, knowledge and historical perspectives.

“Often times craftsmen work alone — or want to work alone. And when they retire they take with them a lifetime of knowledge.

“This is a way that they can share their knowledge of boat-building and their repair skills with one or two interns at a time.

“It’s not a boat school environment. It’s a much more intimate one-on-one environment,” Hoppen said.

Bronson, who grew up in Gig Harbor, has been restoring vintage mahogany runabouts in his Gig Harbor shop for 27 years, and has been volunteering at the BoatShop for about three years. He led several skiff-building programs at the BoatShop in which participants built 12-foot rowing skiffs.

The boat that’s being restored in the mentorship program is Bronson’s own Super Sport.

“There were only about 205 of these boats made between 1964-67,” he said. “They’re sort of Chris Craft hotrods. They’re very fast and racy looking with wild, 1960s type interiors. It’ll probably go about 40-miles-per hour once it’s all rebuilt.”

The restoration includes replacing “all the wood except the structural parts and frames,” Bronson said. “We’re using all Philippine mahogany that we get from Port Townsend. We’ll also completely rebuild the engine and replace all the gauges and the upholstery.

It won’t be totally like the original, but it will be pretty close.”

There’s already a buyer for the boat once restoration is finished, he said.

So far, Bronson and Winther have removed all the nails on the sides and turned the boat upside down to get a good look at the bottom.

Winther, who’ll attend the wooden boat school in Port Townsend this fall, is already veteran of the maritime industry.

She graduated from the California Maritime Academy with a Coast Guard license, then served as navigation officer "... sailing huge ships all around the world," she said.

She's also done commercial fishing in Alaska for several years. "Mostly, I do long line halibut fishing and trolling for salmon," she said. "I sort of fell in love with the idea of being my own boss."

Her BoatShop internship will last for about three months but she hopes she'll "have a chance to stay aboard. It's a 15- or 16-month project and we only work one or two days a week. But it would be fun to see it from start to finish and get the total experience."

The internship also will put her ahead of her fellow students in Port Townsend this fall.

"The first semester we're doing basic woodworking. Then comes the small craft-building part and the final semester is interior finish work," she said.

"I'm really excited to be learning this trade. I love to do things that let you use your hands and be producing something."

She also has learned how to make shoes, she said. Not long ago, she and a friend went to a shoemaking school in Ashland, Oregon. "I think it's important for things to be handmade and made in the U.S.A.," she said. "I'd much rather be producing instead of consuming."

For his part, Bronson, the mentor, is enjoying the process. "Megan is a really bright lady and she really wants to learn. And she has a very impressive background."

Bronson continues to donate his time to the BoatShop whenever he can. "I hope that somebody will walk away from this program with new interests and skills. I'd like that," he said.

The BoatShop received a \$12,000 grant award from the Hagerty Educational Program (HEP) at American's Car Museum to fund the first Mentorship Program. HEP is an educational grant-making organization and is a program of LeMay –America's Car Museum. It's funded by collector vehicle and classic boat enthusiasts to serve youth and young adults on their pathways to careers in automotive restoration and preservation, along with the long-term interests of the collector vehicle and classic-boat communities.

Visitors are welcome to observe the mentorship program in action Thursdays and Saturdays, 10 a.m. to 4 p.m. For information, visit gigharborboatshop.org or call 253-857-9344.



Gig Harbor resident Megan Winther is the first intern of a new program at the Gig Harbor BoatShop that matches master craftsmen with interns to pass along the knowledge and skills. Winther is working with Gig Harbor craftsman Bruce Bronson as her mentor.