

Boat nut's goal is to help youths make waves

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Tell the DJC readers about a defining moment or event in your life that shaped you and/or your career.

A significant turning point in my life came in the early 1980s, when the small marine construction firm I worked for went bankrupt. Our primary business was repair and maintenance of larger yachts, though we worked on just about anything that floated from tugboats to houseboats. Our business, like most of the yacht builders all over the country, was wiped out as a result of the Carter administration's decision to slap a luxury tax on things that "rich" people buy, like yachts. I can speak from first-hand experience that the folks most affected by that decision were the thousands of workers like me who made our living making and repairing things that so-called "rich" people buy. Lousy economic theory!

Do you have a mentor or personal hero who played a role in helping you become the person and professional you are? Who was it and how did he/she impact your life?

I have been blessed with many good (and some not so good) role models, but the one who stands out is Jim Torgeson, owner of Star Fish Marine Construction (same firm as above), who hired me knowing that I didn't know zip about marine construction. I guess I just walked into his shop on the right day and asked for a job. The three years that I "apprenticed" under Jim were among the happiest of my life, as I was learning something new every day from guys I respected. I've been a boat nut ever since.

What do you think is the biggest challenge facing Portland and/or Oregon with regard to its ability to remain a top player in the areas of sustainability, smart growth, urban planning and/or transportation?

I would suggest that both Oregon and Portland not get too smug about how well we rate on the "Fad-O-the-Moment" meter. Most fads tend to look pretty silly with the passage of time. Like most Oregonians, I care about the environment: clean air, clean water, wholesome food, recycling instead of throw-away, etc. I care about transportation, too, particularly when I'm sitting in the daily traffic jam that is attempting to get across the Columbia River. How tough can this be? We need a bigger bridge! It's not doing the environment any good to have 5,000 cars idling for four hours a day just to get across the river.

Decisions about how we manage all of these important issues need to be coupled with concerns about the economic engines that makes all of our communities and our quality of life possible: namely, businesses, particularly the thousands of small businesses that employ by far the majority of Oregon's workforce. Apparently, there are businesses that are too big to fail, but we may some day learn that the small business is an endangered species that we really can't live without. I would like to see Oregon and Portland pay closer attention to this endangered species.

With regard to your answer to the previous question, what role do you see yourself playing during the coming year with regard to helping Portland and/or Oregon meet that challenge?

My mission is to pay attention to how the 75 percent of our youth who are not university bound continue to get the education they need to be skilled and competent workers once they depart high school. The fact is that access to post secondary education and training is just as important for this "forgotten" demographic. My goal is to create and maintain viable career paths for those who desire a career in the construction industry as skilled technical workers. If successful, they will gain a rewarding, family-wage career, and employers in the industry will obtain workers that will make them competitive in the often brutal construction marketplace.

What do you think is the biggest challenge facing the building industry during the coming year, and how do you see yourself helping the industry overcome that hurdle?

Clearly the economy, or should I say the recovery of a vibrant economy, is our greatest challenge for the coming months and possibly years. Confidence in the financial markets and providing credit to businesses with good track records is essential. As to my role, see my answer to the question above.

If it were solely up to you, what project or building would you most like to see happen in the region this year?

Apart from a new I-5 Interstate bridge or possibly a new Sellwood bridge – neither of which is likely to begin construction this year – I would just say that what we need most now is not one big landmark, but a thousand little ones in the form of houses being built for customers with financing in hand who are ready to move into the American dream. Oh, and in the meantime, there are a lot of potholes that need to be filled, hundreds of miles of unimproved roads, right here in Portland that need to be paved, schools and other public structures that are in desperate need of maintenance and upgrades, and so on. Let's have the public sector focus on these truly public needs and leave the landmark hotels and the condo towers for the private sector.

What do you think is the biggest obstacle keeping Portland's built environment from moving forward (e.g. the economy, the city's building design-review process, etc.)?

The economy is huge and dwarfs whatever is in second place on the obstacle scale. I would also have to say that Portland struggles to align its priorities with the needs and desires of the majority of its citizens.

Where do you see yourself in the next 5 years? In the next 10 years?

Being an opinionated guy, I'm not usually at a loss for answers, but this question always stumps me.

Please share a little known fact about yourself, something that people might be surprised to know.

Shortly after my stint working on the Columbia for Star Fish Marine Construction, I was privileged to be able to join a group of church people on a “fact-finding” trip to Israel and what at the time we thought would soon be the new state of Palestine. We talked to both sides, Israelis and Palestinians (in the West Bank and Gaza). It is now almost 30 years hence, and I would like to say that some progress has been made. It has in only one sense that I can think of – the geopolitical “game” is much clearer now, if only to me.

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