

STURNER SAYS by Sandy Lindsey

If you've been wondering what Andy Sturner has been up to, you might want to grab a pen and paper. The man who prides himself on stellar customer service has enough projects in the works to keep the average man busy for two lifetimes.

"It's funny, but I don't boat as much as I used to before I got into the boating industry," says Andy Sturner, a lifelong boater and president and CEO of Aqua Marine Partners, LLC. "The idea that you should never make your profession your hobby is so true. I find myself working seven days a week, 365 days a year. What attracted me to working in the industry was the fact that, as a boater, I felt the customer service that I received was less than it should be. I got into the business to improve that."



That commitment to the boater led to the acquisition of Hi Lift Marina, the 269-slip, full-service marina, and its 30-year-old boat dealership on famous Thunderboat Alley, of speedboat fame. That acquisition has morphed into Passport Marine, the largest Formula dealership, a marina management company that is presently closing on its fourth marina with two others under construction, and the state-of-the-art Vertical Yacht Club on the old Hi-Lift site.

"Hi-Lift Marina was one of the first forklift dry stack storage facilities in the 1960s," says Sturner. "It was also the last remaining marina on this once infamous land."

Under Sturner's guidance, the old 50-foot tall gray metal building is being replaced with a high-tech yacht club with dry storage facility.

"The technology allows us to double the height of the storage, resulting in what should be triple the boat storage," says Sturner. The Manatee Protection Plan rules state that the facility can only have the same 269-boat capacity that Hi-Lift previously had.

"We're still maximizing the space," assures Sturner. "For example, if there were 28-foot boats on both sides of the aisle, the forklift needed a 65-wide aisle for sufficient turning space. Add in the fact that the average forklift at that time had an effective height of 35 feet. The new automated system needs a mere 32-foot aisle, which considerably improves efficiency."

So what does he plan to do with his two million cubic feet of storage space?

"We could have built a smaller building that housed the same boats," he replies, "but instead we're going with the current trend for bigger boats and making our average vessel length 40 feet, up 12 feet from before."

Besides his busy schedule, Sturner still manages to get out on the water.

"I've got a wide range of Formulas at my disposal," he says cheerfully. "We take our clients out on rendezvous and getaways to the Bahamas, the Keys and throughout Florida."

"Once, we were crossing to the Bahamas when we were suddenly surrounded by water spouts," he recalls. "There were 10 people on board, including kids. It was pretty wild, these tornadoes on the water. I, of course, had my video camera out. The boat radar showed the spouts several miles away, but it was still incredible to watch them come down and slam into the water."

"The idea behind the getaways is to get our clients out on the water in ways they might have been concerned about doing on their own," he says. "We take along a mechanic and a paramedic, to be prepared for our customers. We've always been strong proponents of the Boater 101 program. The trips are designed to show new boaters how to comfortably and safely travel in their boats. Once they've gone out with us, they're not as concerned about taking the boat out by themselves the next time."