



Bo Samuel of Pullin Drag charters in Fort Pierce shows students how to cast a fishing line on Feb. 23 in Memorial Park in Fort Pierce during the Chart Your Course program. PROVIDED BY MICHELE MARCH

Program gives teens look at marine jobs on Treasure Coast

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Intercepting smugglers at sea. Working a crane while on a barge two miles off the beach. Steering a client to the fishing catch of a lifetime. These are just some of the careers in the Treasure Coast marine industry.

Chart Your Course — an exposition organized by the Fort Pierce Yacht Club Foundation in collaboration with St. Lucie County schools, the city of Fort Pierce and over 20 marine industry leaders — recently introduced 100 students to a variety of potential careers in the maritime trades. The Feb. 23 event encompassed the Fort Pierce Yacht Club, the Fort Pierce Riverwalk Center and the open space in between the two facilities.

The legacy of the Treasure Coast's marine industry extends back more than 100 years. Nowadays, the local marine industry has an economic impact of \$1.3 billion and accounts for 7,000 jobs in hundreds of businesses, 461 of which are in St. Lucie County, according to the Economic Development Council of St. Lucie County.

Never take no for an answer

Chart Your Course was the brainchild of Diane Korbey of Fort Pierce. The longtime member and former commodore of the Yacht Club said she was inspired by a similar program she saw take shape in the Arundel School District of Annapolis, Maryland.

"I thought it was a great program showing the importance of teaching kids about job opportunities and careers they may not be considering. Working along the waterfront could help someone realize a lifelong dream," said Korbey, 74.

I don't know how many of you have had to deal with Korbey, but she doesn't take "no" for an answer. That's how I first responded to her initial email in November 2022 asking me to participate in Chart Your Course. Next thing I knew, I was directing a panel discussion between marine industry professionals and students from St. Lucie West Centennial and Fort Pierce Central high schools and Forest Grove and Dan McCarty middle schools.

From a love for the water to a career

I'm glad she persuaded me to be a part of it. I learned as much as the kids did, and if this writing thing doesn't work out for me, maybe you'll see me as a deckhand on a working tug boat one of these days.

Students were divided into small groups to engage with the many displays in the Riverwalk Center and adjacent grounds. There, they were able to see what skills are required to work for businesses such as:

- City Marina of Fort Pierce
- Derecktor
- Summerlin's Marine Construction
- Pullin Drag Charters
- St. Lucie Outboard
- Ecological Associates
- Harbor Branch Oceanographic Institute
- The People's Reef
- Marine Cleanup Initiative

Then they were able to walk out on the dock at the Yacht Club to experience up close a tug from McCulley Marine Services, a Florida Fish and Wild-

life Conservation Commission patrol boat and a service vessel from TowBoatU.S.

The Yacht Club provided the students with sandwiches during the two panel discussions. Panelists gave the kids brief explanations about what a day at work in their fields is like, what makes the careers rewarding, the challenges and payoffs, how much they can earn when starting out and later in their career, and interesting anecdotes about the jobs.

Welding underwater

What impressed me the most was the attention the students gave the marine industry representatives. Joining me on the panel were:

- Capt. Chris Caldwell of Captain Chris Yacht Services in Vero Beach
- Jim Dragseth, president of Shearwater Marine in Fort Pierce and Stuart
- Richard Ross, president of the International Longshoreman's Association union local 1359-1860
- Ensign Tony Snyder, boatswain, U.S. Coast Guard Station Fort Pierce
- Richard King, Underwater Engineering Services, Inc.

The students and I learned what it's like to operate a special transport vehicle to offload shipping containers from a cargo vessel. We heard what it's like to restore a vintage trawler for a customer who eagerly anticipates a long-awaited dream voyage. We were told how difficult it is to coordinate an artificial reef project between co-workers above water and below water. We found out what it takes to work one's way up from mate on a sportfishing boat to captain of a long-range cruising vessel. We discovered that enlisting in the Coast Guard is a good way to see the world.

Keeping teenagers engaged

It's hard to engage with teens these days. I should know, I've raised three, and the youngest one, who is still a teen, is in jeopardy of not making it through high school. Seriously, whether you're a parent or not, we all went through this difficult time of our lives and can remember field trips where we got to leave the boring walls of the classroom even for a few hours. For many, there were probably better formed memories of the bus trip than the event we attended.

To be honest, I didn't expect much from the teens. However, during Chart Your Course, many displayed an attitude that gave me hope. They all were on their best behavior. They were respectful to expo presenters, panelists and officials from the Yacht Club and city, including Commodore Forest Blanton, Mayor Linda Hudson and City Manager Nick Mimms.

Several approached the panel about potential career opportunities. Some actually are planning to seek a career along the waterfront.

A few are already enrolled in a school district-sanctioned marine trade training program.

Kudos to Korbey and more than a dozen Yacht Club volunteers. It's no easy task connecting often-distracted teens with the myriad marine careers available on the Treasure Coast. But it's necessary and valuable to a community to give kids direction and options in this complex and confusing world.

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