

American Profile

SOUTHEAST EDIT

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by MARTA W.
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Photos by David Mudd

Building Boats & Memories

Master boat builder Karl Weinert does more than just help students learn the age-old craft of boat building; he helps them create memories as well.



Debi and Karl Weinert help people form bonds while building canoes at their unique school in Big Sandy, Tenn.



For more information, call (731) 584-2103 or log on to www.tennesseeboatschool.com.

Brothers Atticus and Morgan Zellers paddle their handmade pirogue through the water at the Tennessee Boat School.

Weinert and his wife, Debi, opened the Tennessee Boat School in Big Sandy (pop. 518) in April 2004, inviting families, friends and co-workers to come to their 185-acre farm and build a boat in one day under the watchful eye of a seasoned boatwright.

"The wooden boat of yesteryear is a piece of Americana everyone should experience at least once," says Karl, 60. "We want to give people that experience."

With the motto "building memories and keeping them afloat," the venture has drawn an interesting mix of students. "For every person, it's a different pilgrimage," Debi says. "Some people are reaching back to something their dad or grandfather did—working with wood, using hand tools. For families, it's a bonding experience. We've had three generations working to build a boat together. We've had a father wanting to grab one more weekend with his son before the son left for college. It's making memories together and having a tangible product to show for it at the end."

In the school's first year of operation, students finished 22 boats, and reservations for the Class of 2005 are solid. Students start with a pile of pre-cut

wood and use only hand tools to fashion their boats, held together with nails and polyethylene glue. While Debi snaps keepsake pictures, Karl teaches them to bend and mold the wood and recognize the sound of a perfectly seated nail. He shows them how to bring boards together at multiple angles to create a tight-fitting joint. And for those unfamiliar with a bevel gauge—a tool for marking angles—it becomes their best friend by the close of class.

Ann Bearden, of Louisville, Ky., gave the boat-building experience to her husband, two sons and son-in-law as a Christmas gift. "It's a good way for them to develop some camaraderie around a project and make something they can be proud of," she says.

A group of two or more can build a pirogue—a two-man, flat-bottomed canoe—that they get to float on the Weinerts' 10-acre pond and haul away at the end of an eight-hour workday. Students also can craft a larger rowing skiff in two days. No experience is required, and tuition costs \$675 for a team to build the pirogue and \$975 for the skiff.

"This is nothing I'd try with a kit in my garage without the expertise and instruction of someone like Karl," says

Novice boatwrights learn to bend and nail wooden boards.



Dan and Ann Bearden take their craft for a test cruise.

Ted Shouse, a 37-year-old lawyer from Louisville, building a canoe with his girlfriend, Elizabeth Dinkins, to take on weekend camping trips. "Karl's a great teacher and a very patient guy."

The great-grandson of two sea captains, Karl grew up in West Chester, Pa. (pop. 17,861), and built his first wooden boat at age 12 with his father and siblings in the family dining room. "I remember my mother looking on in horror as we nailed the sawhorses to the floor," he says.

He went on to become a master boat builder in Pompano Beach, Fla., constructing 25 years worth of watercraft—from small skiffs and schooners to customized fishing boats and luxury yachts. In 2002, the couple traded in the ocean and sandy beaches of Florida for the rolling farmland and rivers of west Tennessee. "We wanted an area with both seasonal changes and water nearby," says Debi, who handles the business side of the boat school.

The Weinerts hold class one weekend a month from spring through autumn under an open-air barn on their picturesque farm. The schedule enables Karl to build and repair boats of all kinds in an elaborate workshop he's built on the farm, where the couple also grows hay and raises cattle and a handful of chickens.

Still, the main focus for the Weinerts is helping people build both boats and bonds at their unique school.

For Pratt Hubbard, 69, and his son, Ed, 25, the class provided a rare opportunity for them to work side by side all day, without distractions. "We both stay real busy," says Pratt, of McKenzie, Tenn. "This is a great way to get to spend a day with him." ☆

Marta W. Aldrich is a freelance writer in Franklin, Tenn.

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