

## Q & A WITH JIM QUINN

*TWA member and others are talking to writer Sharon Babcock about enduring inspirations, life lessons, and perspectives from their experiences on the working waterfront.*

*This month is the ninth installment in the series: Jim Quinn of the Quinn's Boats in Tacoma.*



In the winter of 2006 between Christmas and New Year's Day, rain and snow storms blanketed Tacoma marinas, causing local boaters to cringe with the reports of the damage to marine craft. What happened to those boats? It is one of Jim Quinn's jobs as a used boat seller and auctioneer to respond to that. He was the auctioneer for more than 70 storm-damaged vessels from the Edmonds Marina, valued at \$10 million before the damage. Quinn says the toughest part of his business is finding the used boat inventory to sell; the easiest part is the auctioneering.

When you talk to him, Quinn doesn't fit the auctioneer's stereotype of an adrenalin-charged pusher of merchandise with a voice raw from years of yelling. Though he puts in long hours six days a week in order to be individually available to customers, he actually seems unusually laid-back, with a casual air that belies any urgent need to sell anything in the next two minutes. He owns and operates Quinn's Boats located on the Foss Waterway from which he resells used boats, boats donated from non-profits, and boats repossessed by banks in the tougher economic times. His favorite quote is "If you sell for less, you don't have to be as smart as everyone else."

He left out the part about how you might have to work harder.

### **Q: What prepared you for this work?**

A: I am one of eight children in my family, the only kid who liked fishing and learned how to drive boats. I was a boat manufacturer's representative and then a partner with Colonel Jim Heaverlo, an old-school auctioneer who could sell anything and didn't consider it a day well-spent until he'd put in 18 hours. After Colonel Jim had a heart attack, he told me I had to start my own business.

### **Q: What have you learned during the 25 years you have been in this business?**

A: (That) I am glad I took the road I took. In its up-and-down cycles, it has involved downsizing from having showrooms, shops, and employees to not--and then doing that again.

### **Q: What surprises you?**

A: I never would have expected the five very challenging years for the marine industry following the 2007-8 economic downturn. Discretionary items are the first to suffer when people are afraid of losing their jobs. Nobody felt secure, so people did not buy boats. Also surprising is that the buying cycle is

unpredictable. From January through April 2013, there was a large influx of boat buyers. Then from May through July, even in 85-degree weather, nothing. The seasons are no predictor of activity.

**Q: What draws you to Commencement Bay as a place to do business?**

A: I have done this work in Everett, Seattle, and now Tacoma. My home is in southeast Pierce County so I appreciate the shorter commute to work. I value the effort being made to give Commencement Bay a good feel, and I find Tacoma to be easier going than locales to the north. It really suits me.

**Q: What are your hopes for Commencement Bay?**

A: That it does not develop so quickly and that the cost of doing business makes it impossible for small marine businesses on its shores to succeed.

**Q: Who is your typical customer?**

A: Most are repeat customers. It may be a surprise, but once in a while it's someone who makes \$50,000 per year. I like being able to bring them into boating as well as the people who have more resources. People travel to buy boats, so many come to Tacoma from elsewhere, some who have bought up to seven vessels with me. Boaters are primarily a glad-to-be-alive bunch, have a lot of interests, and are mainly family-oriented. They like to be outdoors and are active. I love the job because I am around happy people most of the time.