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Markdale Rossiter Boats - Back In Business

Rossiter boat founder back aboard after 16-year absence

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Sixteen years ago, boat designer George Rossiter got a medical diagnosis no one wants: You've got kidney cancer, it's serious, so put your affairs in order.

The entrepreneur followed his doctor's advice. He put a for sale sign on Rossiter Boat Co., a company he founded in 1974 near Collingwood, Ont., as a wooden rowboat maker and transformed over three decades into a builder of 4-metre fiberglass craft, with outboard motors and V-shaped hulls meant to handle heavy waves. He subsequently sold what was then a four-employee business and underwent several gruelling years of cancer treatments.

This story has a happy ending. Once warned he had a year to live, Mr. Rossiter beat cancer. At the Toronto International Boat Show, which started a 10-day run on Friday, the 63-year-old plans to officially announce his return as a consultant to the company. He's climbing back aboard a business that is becoming an international success.

Rossiter Boat grew to a 40-employee company after the founder's departure, moving to a former shoe factory in Markdale, Ont. The new owner added four new models of outboard-powered speedboats to its lineup, ranging from 5 to 7 metres in length, and retailing from \$30,000 to \$125,000.

The company ran into financial difficulties two years ago and filed for bankruptcy in the spring of 2018 with liabilities of \$2.5-

million. Blair Levinsky, co-founder and chief executive of Toronto-based asset manager Waratah Capital Advisors Ltd., test drove a Rossiter craft that summer, heard about the company's problems, and ended up buying both a 7-metre day boat and the business.

"This was a chance to save a Canadian manufacturer and a storied brand," Mr. Levinsky said. "We realized the brand had cult-like status in Muskoka and on Georgian Bay [in Ontario's Cottage Country], and that was starting to spread across the border to Cape Cod, Wisc., the Hamptons and Florida."

In the fall of 2018, Rossiter Boat rehired employees who were laid off after the bankruptcy filing and reopened under the leadership of president Jeff Burchell. He built ties to a network of nine dealers across Canada, and another nine in U.S. markets. Rossiter now produces 150 to 200 boats annually. Mr. Burchell said the company expects this year to add dealers in Quebec and the Atlantic provinces and is looking at expansion in Europe.

The first dealer to sell Rossiter products, more than three decades ago, was Desmasons Boatworks in Pointe au Baril, Ont., on Georgian Bay. "This brand has become the classic, closed-deck boat for the discerning cottage buyer," co-owner Matt French said.

He added Rossiter is known for safe, high-performance craft that buyers can customize during construction by dealing directly with the factory. "These boats are handmade in Canada, and that is a powerful selling tool," Mr. French said.

Rossiter Boat is taking advantage of a

consumer shift from recreational boats with inboard engines, inside their hulls, to stern-mounted outboard engines, which are more fuel efficient and maximize cabin space. Across North America, buyers are expected to spend approximately US\$40-billion this year to purchase more than 280,000 personal watercraft, according to forecasts from the Washington-based National Marine Manufacturers Association.

For the Rossiter Boat founder, coming back to work means tinkering with boat designs, but letting his successors run the rest of the business. Mr. Rossiter, who graduated from a marine architecture program at a university in Maine, spent recent years working as a boat broker, arranging sales of used watercraft.

When Mr. Burchell invited him back this month, Mr. Rossiter began working on a new layout for the 4-metre craft he first designed in 2004 and the possible launch of a 8-metre coastal boat powered by two 250 horsepower engines, for customers on big water, or those who want to make a big impact.

"I really had no idea how this would all work out, and I'm just so happy to be here, and to see the quality of workmanship still matters," said Mr. Rossiter, who visited the factory twice last week.

He said like many small businesses with international aspirations, the key to Rossiter Boat's growth is a polished marketing campaign, something the new owners brought to the company. "I was never much good at blowing my own horn," Mr. Rossiter said.

Thanks

Paul & Gail