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Yacht master miles from sea

Cary designer of luxury boats chose to be closer to clients via larger airport



Ward Setzer, back, of Setzer Design Group, works with naval architect Kevin Burns. Setzer plans to diversify into surfboard, windsurfers, nautical apparel, marine hardware and 38-foot boats.

Staff Photo by Takaaki Iwabu

By DUDLEY PRICE, Staff Writer

CARY -- A three-foot-long scale model of a multimillion-dollar superyacht adorns the lobby of Setzer Design Group. Poster-size photos of huge yachts bashing through ocean waves line conference-room walls. Inch-thick books hold plans for dozens of luxury yachts 200 feet in length -- or longer.

It's not what you would expect in a business tucked away in a suburban office building a hundred miles from the Atlantic. But then most businesses don't have Ward Setzer as their owner.

"There are hundreds of [yacht] designers in the country and thousands in the world, but I'd rank him in the top 10," said Dudley Dawson, Yachting Magazine's technical editor.

"You've got to know boats, design and how to run a business, and without all three you won't be a success," Dawson said. Setzer "has integrated all three and succeeded in a business that it's tough to be successful in."

Over 14 years, Setzer's five-employee firm has designed more than 200 yachts averaging 130 feet in length and a \$15 million average cost. When Cary developer Tim Smith bought a 118-footer several years ago, Setzer drew the plans. Country singer turned sausage magnate Jimmy Dean turned to Setzer for a 132-foot cruiser, named after his 1961 hit "Big Bad John."

One yacht wasn't enough for NASCAR team owner Felix Sabates, who owned

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112-foot and 130-foot Setzer-designed super cruisers, both named "Victory Lane."

But since most owners intensely value their privacy and require Setzer to sign confidentiality agreements, he isn't naming many names.

"People think it's movie stars, but movie stars charter boats, they don't own them," Setzer said. "People who buy these boats are normally self-made" individuals you've never heard of who became quite wealthy.

Setzer has nine projects under way, including a 210-foot yacht that will cost about \$40 million. His firm, which includes two other naval designers, will draw specifications for hulls, water and fuel tanks, acoustics, lighting, engine rooms, heating, ventilation and air conditioning, even intricate woodwork.

Standard items include hot tubs, lockers for scuba gear, wine rooms, garages for Harley-Davidson motorcycles and helicopter landing pads. Then, after roughly nine months of work billed at \$100 to \$150 an hour, projects are sent to boatyards around the world for bids.

Setzer doesn't just design boats, he builds them, albeit on a much smaller scale - and for himself. In a separate shop he has built two kayaks, two 15-foot "sharpie"-style sailboats, and he is working on a 17-foot mahogany runabout.

"If you can't do it with your hands, you can't draw it," he said.

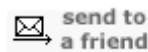
Setzer, 45, grew up a landlubber in Hickory and later earned a degree in architecture from N.C. State University's School of Design. But a summer-school course in marine science in Morehead City turned his interest to boats. He took frequent trips to the state Maritime Museum in Beaufort to read about hulls and construction. After graduation from NCSU, Setzer studied yacht design at the Maine Maritime Academy for a year.

Early work afterward took him to Hatteras Yachts in New Bern where he managed the firm's custom yacht program, building boats from 92 feet to 130 feet in length. He left Hatteras in 1991, started his own company and moved to Cary two years later, mainly to be closer to Raleigh-Durham International Airport. He took weekly flights to visit clients and boatyards around the world.

Now, Setzer wants to capitalize on his success by diversifying, a la fashion designer Ralph Lauren, who added lines of paint, bedding and furniture. Setzer is starting a brand named Windswell that will sell surfboards and windsurfers, nautical apparel, marine hardware and fully-equipped 38-foot boats at \$410,000 each. He plans to introduce the boats and surfboards in October at a boat show in Fort Lauderdale, Fla. He has hired Raleigh public relations firm French/West/Vaughan to generate publicity -- and hopefully investors.

"Surfboards are the simplest form of naval architecture," said Setzer, who has been surfing since he was a teenager. "At the heart of it all, you're just talking to a designer and we've got to get the creative juices out."

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