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BUSINESS

Grand day for Grand Craft: Genoa City boat manufacturer celebrates release of new Burnham “flagship” with launch party at Gage Marin

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Hopes were running high among state and local dignitaries last year when Gov. Tony Evers and Wisconsin Economic Development Corporation (WEDC) Secretary and CEO Missy Hughes announced that Holland, Mich.-based Grand Craft Boats, LLC, a legacy 42-year builder of fine mahogany runabouts, was relocating its headquarters and production operations west to Wisconsin, Walworth County and the Village of Genoa City.

As part of the relocation package, WEDC authorized up to \$125,000 in state income tax credits over three years, the actual amount of tax credits to be released contingent on the number of jobs created and capital invested in the project.

“Wisconsin’s thriving manufacturing industry and world-class workforce continue to attract businesses from around the world,” Evers said at the time. “We’re excited that Grand Craft has decided to relocate to Wisconsin. The company joins a long list of exceptional craftsmanship and manufacturing in our state and they will assuredly be a strong addition to our state economy and the southeastern Wisconsin community.”

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But the ultimate litmus test of any big economic development announcement lies in the delivery on the promises made — the rubber-meets-the-road factor. Or, in the case of Grand Craft, the boat-meets-the-water factor.

Celebrating a major milestone in its ambitious and high-profile relocation to the Badger State and its retail alliance with Williams Bay-based Gage Marine, Grand Craft kicked off the prime Geneva Lake boating season on June 30 with a gala lakefront launch party at Gage's headquarters at PIER 290, 1 Leichty Dr. in Williams Bay.

There, Grand Craft president and chief executive officer Patrick Gallagher introduced the company's newest addition to its expansive line of luxury boat offerings — Grand Craft's all-mahogany 26-foot Burnham "flagship," which retails for \$389,000 and blends retro style with contemporary flair and mechanical components.

"This model has not been seen here on the Lake and it's an opportunity for some of the 'Who's Who' of The Lake to get a glimpse of it and a shot at buying one of the two existing models available," Gallagher said of Grand Craft's launch party for the Burnham.

One Burnham, equipped with an upholstered sun pad bed, was on display on shore. The other Burnham was docked on Geneva Lake at PIER 290.

"They're not only incredibly sleek with a contemporary style, they also have the latest technology, such as a 430 horsepower V-8 Ilmor engine with a bow-thruster, premium sound system, courtesy lighting," Gallagher said. "The construction of it is a triple-planked hull made of African mahogany and it's comprised of thousands of man

hours, yet we are also embracing the most modern technology to computer-design the boat. The boat has been drawn up in CAD and many of the critical structural components of the hull are CNC-cut from the CAD drawings. What that means is it's a really well engineered boat from bow to stern. From the beginning to the end, it's really a marriage of the old world craftsmanship being utilized by our skilled carpenters, and our marine technicians working with the latest technologies.”

Gallagher and his wife Rose, who serves as Grand Craft's executive vice president, acquired Grand Craft from owner Jeff Cavanagh in February 2021, enamored with the company's craftsmanship and the timeless appeal of its classic 20's and 30's styled runabouts. Grand Craft's new executive team is rounded out by Jeff Podhajsky, who serves as vice president of operations.

“The reason these boats are so appealing to our customers is that it appeals to their unique sense of style and attention to detail,” Gallagher said. “These folks are very persnickety in what they're looking for. They have an eye for the finer things. They don't want their boat to look like everyone else's. And they're looking for a deeper connection with their boat ... They know that their boat was really built by skilled craftsmen and NOT mass produced, which also allows them to put their unique fingerprint on the boat a bit in choosing some amenities and features. The common thread — we hear this constantly — is ‘that boat is a work of art.’ Even our advertising talks about how these aren't just boats, they're heirlooms. For many of these folks, they keep it in the family. They create memories that are tied directly to experiences of being on their boats.”

Premium partners



Gage Marine owner Bill Gage, Jr. and Grand Crafts Boats, LLC president and CEO Patrick Gallagher

Gallagher said he wasn't looking for just any boat dealer as a retail partner as Grand Craft relocated its headquarters and production to Genoa City last summer. With deep family ties to the Lake Geneva area since the mid-1970s, Gallagher said he had only one "heritage" marine dealer in his sights — Gage.

"Hands down for me ... it made sense on a lot of levels," Gallagher said. "It (Gage) was the first and last call I made for a dealer to represent Grand Craft on Geneva Lake."

For third-generation Gage Marine owner Bill Gage, Jr., Grand Craft is a good fit for the company's line of top-quality luxury boat offerings.

Gage Marine, which traces its history back to 1873 through two previous owners, came into the Gage family fold when Bill Gage's grandfather, Russell, bought company in 1958.

"We sell only the premium and our four lead brands are best-in-class — ChrisCraft, Boston Whaler, Bennington and MasterCraft," Gage said. "As a premium dealership, we look for partners that are best-in-class. Grand Craft should be a good partnership. We help people enjoy their free time, the most valuable commodity you have."

A good move

Grand Craft's relocation to a nearly 25,000-square-foot southeastern Walworth County manufacturing facility at 1021 Williams Rd. in Genoa City has been a positive move for the company's reinvigoration according to Gallagher, citing the area's "deep pool of talent not only for marine technicians, but also for very skilled finish carpenters who have a really keen eye."

"I admire and respect what was accomplished in Holland, Mich. the first 42 years of Grand Craft's existence, but Rose and I felt like if we were going to acquire and put all we've got into revitalizing Grand Craft, we needed to replant it," Gallagher said. "It was a no-brainer to take a hard look at Walworth County and our mind was made up rather swiftly after talking about it. We've been really happy with the decision to move here and the folks we're hired since moving here."

Grand Craft currently employs nine and has hired Laughlin Constable, of Chicago and Milwaukee, as the firm's advertising and public relations agency. Gallagher said the company anticipates adding another 10 employees to its roster over the next 1-2 years

as it ramps up production to a target “sweet spot” of 20-25 handcrafted luxury boats annually.

Producing two boats under its new ownership in 2021 as the company relocated its operations, Gallagher said Grand Craft expects to complete five boats this year and ten next year as the company gets its sea legs in Wisconsin.

Among the boats currently under construction in Genoa City is a 36-foot commuter-style Winchester water limousine for a high-end resort in Florida. Gallagher said Grand Craft expects to start production on a second Winchester for the same customer in the third quarter.



Grand Craft president and CEO Patrick Gallagher with company founder Steve Northuis

Among those attending the June 30 launch party was Steve Northuis, who founded Grand Craft in 1979. Northuis sold the company in 1984 to Richard “Dick” Sligh, who sold Grand Craft to Cavanagh in 2010.

Northuis said he expects great things with Patrick Gallagher at Grand Craft's helm as president and CEO, calling the company's relocation "Michigan's loss and Wisconsin's gain."

"He's phenomenal, the right guy to own this company," Northuis said. "He's doing everything perfect. The Gallaghers are really passionate. I think this is going to be best chapter of Grand Craft yet."

Out on the PIER 290 dock, Grand Craft senior marine technician Tim Williams, a longtime former Gage Marine veteran, was offering Burnham rides on Geneva Lake, calling the runabout an "unbelievable" ride.

"The product we're putting out speaks for itself," Williams said. "We really put in a lot of effort and engineering to deliver a superior product with attention to detail."

About Grand Craft

Grand Craft currently produces five models of runabouts with varying lengths from 20-40 feet, all of which can be customized – The Burnham, Dearborn, Roosevelt, Winchester and Wrightwood. Grant Craft also creates unique "one-off" custom boats to order.

Grand Craft customers include Jennifer Lopez, Robert Redford, Kid Rock, Tim Allen and more.

For more information, visit www.grandcraft.com.

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