

# Sea base rises from Ike's wreckage

By Harvey Rice, Houston Chronicle, September 28, 2014

GALVESTON - Chuck Herrera is still awed by the five-story high-tech building rising above Offatts Bayou on Galveston Island, even though he had a hand in its conception.

The CEO of the Boy Scouts' Bay Area Council never imagined when he helped develop a plan for a modest sailing and learning center for Sea Scouts that it would become a state-of-the-art learning center on 10 acres overlooking a 39-boat-and-growing fleet moored at a modern marina.



The council came up with a long-range plan in 2007 to expand seafaring learning beyond Sea Scouts to the community, but never dreamed it would include a floating learning center outfitted with the latest technology and iPads for 50 students designed to serve the entire Houston region. Herrera said Sea Scout Base Galveston will be unrivaled in its unique educational offerings when it is completed later this year.

"It's way beyond the original vision," he said. "You sit back, pinch yourself and say, 'Wow.'"

The \$40 million sailing and learning complex, designed to teach science and instill a love of the sea, came out of a meeting Herrera had in 2008 with Frito heir Charles Doolin.

Doolin and his wife, Rosemary, are avid Sea Scout supporters and purchased the 83-foot-long former U.S. Coast Guard cutter Point Glass in 2005 to teach navigation and seamanship, said Ed Carrette, Sea Scout Base Galveston executive director.

The Doolins searched the Texas coast for a deep-water berth for the Point Glass and found it in Galveston. They purchased a narrow piece of property between Interstate 45 and Offatts Bayou, about 2 miles south of the Galveston Causeway. The property had a modest brick building that the Doolins wanted to use as a classroom.

The Bay Area Council, which covers Galveston and Brazoria counties, had nurtured the idea of a Sea Scout base of some sort since 1946. "Nobody ever came to the table and said this is a great idea and this is the money to build it," Carrette said. The council decided it would try to raise money for its 2007 plan late the following year.

## ***'Substantial' checks***

Herrera was at a meeting in Brazoria County one day in January 2008 when he received a call from his Galveston office saying someone wanted to meet with him. When he returned to his office, he found Charles Doolin waiting patiently. A discussion ensued. At the end, Doolin wrote a check to the council. Herrera won't say for how much, other than it was "substantial."

Just as the council's fundraising effort was getting underway, Hurricane Ike struck in September 2008. "We just went underground," Herrera said about the doomed capital campaign.

A year later, Doolin gave the council another "substantial" check. The partnership was finally sealed in 2010, Herrera recalled. "Some members of our council board sat down for dinner one evening and we just asked him, 'Do you want to be in a partnership?'" Herrera said. "He doesn't engage in lengthy conversation. He said, 'Yes.'"

In the Doolins, the council had found donors with a mission. "They believe this is what the Lord wants them to do," said Carrette, who described the couple as "very private people and unassuming." The Doolins were unavailable for comment.

### *Seized opportunity*

With Doolin as a partner, the possibilities expanded. "His vision was greater than ours," Herrera said. "Ours was \$2 million to \$3 million. His was initially \$10 million and it just multiplied from there."

Unexpectedly, the devastation from Hurricane Ike opened an opportunity that the Doolins seized. The storm's fury deflated the prospects for a proposed commercial development next to the property the Doolins had acquired for the Point Glass. The Doolins purchased the adjoining property, opening the possibility for a grander vision, Carrette said. "When they bought that, they had no idea they would be able to acquire the lot next door or the lot next door to that," he said.

Given the large investment made by the Doolins, the council agreed to create a separate, nonprofit organization to run the base. "He has made a very large investment, so we felt that to protect that investment we needed to make it a 501C," Herrera said, referring to a nonprofit tax category.

The concept expanded further when the Doolins met Huey Barnett, who had developed a science program called BaySmart that put Clear Creek Elementary school children on boats to learn science through hands-on experience on Galveston Bay. Barnett was ailing and the program was in danger of extinction when the Doolins decided it fit into their vision of Sea Scout Base Galveston. "We ended up absorbing the BaySmart program into what we do," Carrette said. "It got a new life, and now we have our own vessel that's dedicated to it."

The BaySmart program will be conducted on a 100-foot former crew boat that is being rebuilt from "stem to stern" with the latest technology, said Rob Clift, BaySmart director. Herrera said the boat is so technologically advanced that "a single child could captain the ship with an iPad."

The five-story building is built to withstand a Category 5 hurricane and has been offered to island officials as a command center for the next storm, Clift said. It's equipped with electronic locks on dorm room doors that open only for youths wearing an electronic bracelet. The building is designed to be a showcase for energy-efficient green technologies, with LED lights that go on when an area is entered and shut off when it's vacant. Rainwater is captured for reuse, and a rooftop garden reduces heat inside the building and will provide herbs for the kitchen.

The grounds include a separate office building and an outdoor chapel, set amid wetlands, where several weddings already are booked. A house that sat on the southwest end of the property was placed on a barge and moved to the Bolivar Peninsula to make room for expansion.

Although the base is still under construction, several programs are underway. The base has a sailing class for the disabled that uses special lifts to place wheelchair users on boats where they take control of the vessel. Charles Doolin's mother was a polio victim and because of the challenges he saw her face, the entire Sea Scout Base is designed with the disabled in mind, Carrette said. The base's friendliness to the disabled is one reason it's hosting the U.S. Disabled Sailing Championship in October.

***'This makes math fun'***

On a recent Tuesday, as construction workers hammered away at concrete with a jackhammer nearby, Base Education Coordinator Abigail Hils had students spread sails on the lawn behind the office building. The six boys from three local schools learned how to calculate the area of the sail before being allowed onto a sailboat. Isaiah Courtney, 12, a seventh-grader at Odyssey Academy in Galveston, said, "I don't like math in general, but doing this makes math fun because it's so physical."