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Roscioli paints career path of innovation, inspiration

In 1962, Bob Roscioli prized his paint brushes. He shaped and cared for each one.

"When you get them, they're square, then they start to taper a little, and then, when you get it right, it's a tip," he said.

"It takes years and years of use to get it right."

A compact, strong man with thick hands, he gently put his palms and fingertips together, then lightly pressed them into the edge of a counter to simulate painting a boat with such a tip.

"You might as well take my wallet before you take my paint brush," Roscioli said.

His skill with those brushes is what led to his life's work, Roscioli Yachting Center. From the home he designed across the New River in Fort Lauderdale, he talked about his investment in excellent tools, from his brushes to his employees, colleagues and customers. As a result of that investment, Bob Roscioli has painted a broad stroke of innovation and inspiration throughout the

yacht industry.

At 20 years old, Roscioli was fired from his boatyard labor job when he asked for a 10-cent raise.

"They said they didn't like my attitude," he said. Instead of being discouraged, he saw opportunity. "I was standing there with my lunch pail and thought, 'There's going to be a day - I'm going to be somebody.'"

It is hard to know and recognize opportunity, he said.

"People say I got breaks - I found breaks," he said.

At the root of his drive is his ever-present memory of the challenges of his impoverished childhood in Philadelphia. Roscioli's father died when he was young. He and his mother struggled to pay bills, stay warm and have enough to eat as the United States was coming out of the Great Depression. He did not do well at Catholic school. But

he values the hardships and credits them with his ability to overcome adversity. At age 12, he moved with his mother to South Florida, where he worked at any and every job he could to help pay the bills. He worked on boats with his



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Colleagues recall CEO's long paint history, from hand brushed to high tech

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uncle, pumped gas, delivered ice, and washed boats at Bahia Mar and Pier 66.

Then a captain hired him to sand and repair a damaged 105-foot boat. Roscioli had no formal business, but said he would get the job done.

"I found a place to put the boat, we moved it to Stryker Marine," he said. "That was the start of a 19-year career."

Surrounded by mangroves, alligators, and mosquitos behind Lauderdale Boat Yard, on the south side of State Road 84/Marina Mile in Fort Lauderdale, Roscioli began to paint boats with a fervor.

He built his reputation and business from a shed in the swamp into the 14-acre full-service yard that bears his name.

"My mother told me to protect my name," Roscioli said. "It's the one thing you have."

That property had a pay phone down the dock, three Jiffy Johns (one each for clients, office and workers), and electric power, but only a 500-foot water hose that was run under the river for fresh

water, he said. He worked from a ladder in the water because he did not have a floating dock.

It was during that time in the late 1970s that Christian von der Heyde, a chemist with US Paint (who later retired as CEO and president of the company) went to meet Roscioli. He had heard about his reputation as a painter.

"As it was customary to wear a suit and tie, I always had the feeling he looked down on corporate guys," von der Heyde said in a recent phone conversation. "He came out in a paint suit, just looking at the 'suits,' as he called us, trying to tell him about paint."

Von der Heyde introduced Awlgrip, a chemically cured, two-part coating that was sprayed on airplanes. Until then, it had not been used in marine applications.

"Bob had a big Doberman," von der Heyde said. "You could see in his eyes, if something goes wrong, 'I will send this dog after you.' I was nervous and hoping the new product was a success."

He had reason to worry. The polyester urethane paint was designed to be



PHOTO PROVIDED

Bob Roscioli paints *Smoky*, a steamboat, with an unidentified man in 1962 in Fort Lauderdale.

applied in a controlled environment and Roscioli's place outdoors was anything but – von der Heyde recalled damaged floors and dirt roads. Although Roscioli had a reputation as an expert at applying the hand-brushed, one-part, air-dry enamel of the day, the idea of mixing and spraying paint on boats was new.

"It was difficult in Florida, with humidity, mosquitos – and at 3 o'clock

it starts to rain," von der Heyde said. "It was always a gamble, rain could destroy the application. But he knew how to handle it, he was a good craftsman. The Awlgrip at that time was developed for aviation, and I think Bob recognized there was an opportunity to adapt the technology. Bob was always willing to try something new."

The two became good friends and in

2004, von der Heyde, now working with a different company, thought first of Roscioli when the time came to introduce another product for the marine market: Alexseal. The two painted the first boat with the coating.

"He took the gamble and it came out fantastic. I call him the pioneer of polyester urethane in the marine market in the U.S. and globally," von der Heyde said. "He was always first, with his know-how and what to look for, he had quite the experience. He is still interested and hands-on. If necessary, he would pick up a spray gun. He is a craftsman, a little bit rough outside, but with a big heart."

Roscioli said he painted every Feadship and Burger in the late '60s and '70s. He was often called on when paint companies wanted advice. David Halcomb worked on primers with Roscioli. Halcomb was yacht division sales manager at US Paint; he now works with CD Consultants.

"Bob and I went to Manitowoc [Wisconsin]. Henry Burger said, 'You need to figure how to put paint on this boat,'" Halcomb said. "It was a dirt floor, no ventilation with a kerosene heater – and we're spraying volatile chemicals, trying

to cure it without blowing up.

"There was nowhere to get answers, there was no text book, no history. Bob was creative and eventually successful."

His business continued to grow, as did Fort Lauderdale, and during the 1970s, plans were underway for construction of the major interstate, I-595, directly above where Roscioli worked. So in 1981, he leased the former Admiralty property across the street. Things were different then.

"A 140-foot yacht was huge at that time," Roscioli said. And the property housed "little rusty sheds." Although he did not have \$3 million to buy the property, his personal promise to repay was enough for the bank to loan him the money.

Throughout his career, Roscioli has looked for employees who will give the company both "heart and head" in much the same way that he has. At 5-foot 6-inches tall, he said was the smallest guy on many of his teams in high school track, football and wrestling, and he had to fight and work harder to prove himself.

"No question, sports is important," he said. And he hires people who agree. "Sports changed my life. I was with the



Surrounded by photographs, awards and inspirational plaques in his office at Roscioli Yachting Center in Fort Lauderdale, Bob Roscioli prefers to be among the workers in the full-service shipyard.

wrong crowd, and I looked over and saw the jocks and realized that would be better."

He is willing to give a chance to others who hung out with "the wrong crowd." Several have become top employees, including several convicted felons.

"The kid spent 20 years in prison for murder," Roscioli said. "He is my star, he's the best guy."

Another was promoted to paint foreman and eventually started his own business.

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Staight-talking, hands-on Roscioli encourages his employees to excel

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"Some of the others in the industry don't know how to talk to a guy like that, he'll go to HR [human resources] and never get anywhere," Roscioli said. "Like the guy with the gold teeth. He was troubled before, but now he never misses a day."

Colleagues and employees attest that although he has a rough side, Roscioli inspires them.

"Being a mentor, that's my thing. I love when I take an unqualified person and train them," Roscioli said. "It makes them feel good, and they become a good part of the community, the job and a team."

Shawn Schmoll started work at RYC as a 19-year-old "yard dog," as he called it, doing manual labor, more than 30 years ago.

"The first time we spoke, I was pouring a cement pad and my boots were cutting into my leg," Schmoll wrote in an email. "I never stopped working, just kept going. He said, 'I've been watching you for a few days, you are strong physically and mentally, but you need to think about a job, set up the job and attack the job. Shawn, you set up and attack, but you did not think.'"

"One day you will have a crew and you have to ensure they have everything they will need to be successful," Roscioli told him. "What good will it be kicking ass for one week and having to take a month off because your boots cut your leg and caused an infection?"

Schmoll took that lesson, and many others, and is now plant manager at Donzi Yachts, a company Roscioli bought in the 1980s.

Roscioli uses many tools to teach leadership and teamwork. Even though Schmoll had never rowed, Roscioli took him out on his lifeguard rowboat.

"Thirty minutes into trying to get rhythm and beating the hell out of the boat, Bob said, 'Stop.' I was sure he was going to throw me out of the boat," Schmoll said. "Instead, he said, 'Look, you have to have a goal with everything in life. Being successful is not an accident. You plan, then execute the plan. During the execution, you will be faced with obstacles – this is where passion comes in. Passion is blind to everything but the goal.'"

Roscioli then explained the tide was ebbing and would soon be too strong to row through.

"We have to execute together," he said. "Our passion to succeed will overcome the strength of the tide, or we are going to end up by Pier 66. Now get your mind right and let's kick some ass."

The two made it back and Schmoll keeps a photo of that day as a reminder of that lesson.

"To this day, he still makes his rounds every morning, putting out fires while always trying to teach," Schmoll wrote of Roscioli, now 76. "He is more of a coach than anything else, the Vince Lombardi of the shipyards."

About five years ago, Connie Wilkerson began to learn her lessons when she was hired as assistant to Roscioli and to the company's CFO.

"He said, 'I enjoy working with you, but you need to step out of your comfort zone,'" Wilkerson said. Although very uncomfortable with public speaking, she took on Roscioli's challenge to address the staff at meeting. As a motivational topic, she studied up on airline pilot Capt. Chesley "Sully" Sullenberger's safe landing of an airplane on the Hudson River.

"It was my way to tell our team to work together," she said. Although difficult, she said, "It was a feeling of accomplishment and a confidence builder."

She continues to learn from what her boss does, like the way he reads a plaque on his wall.

"Everyday when he walks through the door, he repeats those words: 'Today's the Day' – even if he's not having a good day," she said. "My interpretation of those words is work hard and meet the challenges of the day."

Capt. Marvin Wilson respects Roscioli's willingness to share his wealth of information.

"As far as boat knowledge, he's an encyclopedia," Capt. Wilson said. The two often meet for Sunday brunch to talk politics, boats, fishing, airplanes, Italian food (which Roscioli loves to cook) and Donzis.

"He loves the sportfishers, that's his hobby," Wilson said. "He loves Donzi and is still building them."

Many people don't know Roscioli has been a serious cyclist, has a black belt in karate, and loves to work outdoors, cutting trees and clearing fields on his property in West Virginia, Capt. Wilson said.

"Everyone knows him as a hard-ass, but he probably has the longest retained employees," Capt. Wilson said. "Bob

doesn't care what people think, what's important is the truth. He would say, 'Look at what we do, our work ethic.' A lot of people hate Bob. If everybody likes you, you're not doing anything, he says."

Justine Avila, who handles the company's marketing and public relations, said that some people are not comfortable with Roscioli's in-your-face, no-nonsense, demanding manner.

"I've worked for similar polarizing figures," she said. "I was surprised to get the job, the interview did not go well."

Roscioli's strong political conservatism challenges some people, she said.

"If you take out the politics and realize what this man has done – I mean, he was a lifeguard and delivered ice that melted halfway before it got to the boat," she said. "This place is his legacy."

And, surprisingly, she said, "This hard man taught me to soften up."

Roscioli is a role model, said Kit Denison, who formerly worked with his family's Broward Marine and now is a superyacht broker with Denison Yacht Sales. He told of a time that Roscioli, a competitor in the 1970s, chose to preserve the two men's friendship and the reputation of the industry over his personal business.

"We were short a few people and got behind schedule," Denison said. "Bob provided his men to come help. He doesn't get enough credit for doing things like that. I think that would surprise people. He has the reputation of being a tough guy. You have to be tough in this industry, but he would help."

He said Roscioli's leadership has also boosted the industry.

"He goes through rough times and comes out the other side," Denison said in reference to a boat that fell from a lift while under Roscioli's watch. "It's devastating when things happen at a shipyard, but we go on. He was always looking at what to do, how to make it better, how to learn from that."

The current Roscioli boatyard and service department, built from the ground up, are a testament to his vision, Denison said.

"He really is a perfectionist," Denison said. "I've seen him where there's a question about a bill or something not done right. He makes it good, that's why he can maintain."

Mike Joyce, CEO of Hargrave, met Roscioli in 1977.

"You begin to sense we're going through a generational change," Joyce said. There is a decline in the traits that propelled Roscioli to success, such as personal responsibility and involvement, Joyce said.

"If it's not right, he's in the middle, up to his neck in it," Joyce said. "It's not,

'Go see the guy in the yard.' That's what this industry is about to lose. If you can't deliver the service people expect, when you start giving excuses, that's what scares me and Bob. The service people are the heroes – the minute you can't provide service, it's over."

"You can have alarms going off, things going bad, and it will get fixed," Joyce said. "You sleep better at night knowing you have a Bob in your life."

Finding qualified employees has challenged many of the longtime yacht industry professionals.

"You can't find people that know about boats, you have to train them," Denison said. "You see him on a typical day at 7 a.m. unloading a truck with the forklift. He's a hands-on guy."

Both Denison and Roscioli work with family. Roscioli's wife, Sharon, has worked with him since they met in the 1960s and married in 1969. She is secretary-treasurer, while their daughter, Heather, is an office executive, and their son, Rob, is a second-generation painter and refinisher.

And there are many longtime employees at Roscioli. Many are experts after decades in electrical, carpentry, mechanical, fabrication or construction fields. They may not be walking as quickly, but they have wisdom and shortcuts, said Denison.

"Bob keeps them on, they teach other people," Denison said. "They're not thrown on the junk pile because they turned 60."

Roscioli and his colleagues from the 1970s often discuss what the future of the yacht industry will look like.

"A full-service marina is a very challenging situation," Denison said. "Contractors are easy, they leave when they're done. Full service is hard."

The marine industry is fragile. We need to train people from a variety of industries to work in the marine field, we need to recruit from around the country, Roscioli said.

"My advice to the industry is we better promote the trades – we need people now, or this industry will not survive," he said.

And those people need to be valued tools, Roscioli said. Just like the paint brushes he worked with so long ago.

"Today," he said. "Painters mostly use throwaway brushes."

