



Doris Colgate of  
Offshore Sailing School.

# Smooth SAILING

Couple turn their passion into an international venture

STORY BY KIRA LEWIS • PHOTO BY LINDSAY TERRY

When Doris Colgate married her husband Steve, a lifelong sailor, on Dec. 17, 1969, part of her marriage vows included a promise that she would never come between him and his racing.

“He thrived on it,” she says. “It could have easily been like a mistress.”

Five years prior to marrying Doris, Steve had turned his passion into a business and started the Offshore Sailing School. Doris, who stepped into the role of the company’s CEO and president, became its anchor.

“My husband started the business and I married into it,” she says. ▶▶

“Doris could have parked her headquarters anywhere in the world, but she brought it here.”

— CHRISTIN COLLINS

In this file photo, Andrea Roth and her husband Nathaniel of Christmas Valley, Ore., learn to sail from instructor Cory Crowner at Offshore Sailing School in Fort Myers Beach.



Together they grew the school from its original location in New York to seven instructional locations, including as far south at the British Virgin Islands and Puerto Rico.

This year, the company will be celebrating its 50th anniversary. Over those 50 years, Doris estimates that they have taught more than 130,000 students.

Four of the Offshore Sailing School's instructional locations are located in Florida, as is the company's headquarters, which are located in Fort Myers.

And while they expanded the business together, Doris has also done her best to encourage more women to take up sailing. That's because as she developed her own love of sailing through their years of expansion, she often noticed that there were few other female sailors.

“It was one-third 1/3 women to two-thirds 2/3 men and the women were mostly wives, and sometimes reluctant wives at that,” she says.

In 1990, Doris started the National Women's Sailing Association. She formed a board of 12 women, many her former students, to help guide the new organization. They developed a “You Can Sail” escape program for women and taught by women; taught at-risk girls around the country to sail through “Adventure Sail”; and

conducted “Take the Helm” seminars at boat shows across the country attracting upwards of 800 people per session.

Eventually the NWSA was converted to nonprofit status and became known as the Women's Sailing Foundation. Doris retired from the organization in 2000, but under the guidance of its board of directors, the foundation is still going strong.

Years before that, the Colgates first began pursuing the idea of a permanent expansion into Florida during the fuel shortage that occurred in the 1970s.

At that time, the Offshore Sailing School was operating primarily in Puerto Rico, the Bahamas and the British Virgin Islands. As gas prices started skyrocketing, potential students for their courses were finding the expense of air travel prohibitive.

In May 1975 over Doris' birthday, the Colgates took a trip from Port St. Lucie to the Keys and then came over to Florida's West Coast. They were hoping to find a new location that would meet several important criteria.

The Colgates asked a local sailboat operator for ideas. He sent them directly to South Seas Plantation on Captiva, which today is the South Seas Island Resort. When they arrived, Doris says, “It was the most beautiful place in the world.”

They collected all their scrapbooks

and marketing materials preparing to do a full sales presentation to the general manager. However, he quickly cut them off, having already been to their Great Exuma, Bahamas, location.

“He said, ‘You don't have to show me those, I know who you are.’ It was a done deal,” Doris recalls.

In November 1975, they opened operations at South Seas and from then until 1988, Doris and Steve traveled back and forth from their primary offices in New York. “We kept saying, why are we doing this?” she says.

In 1988, they relocated the company's offices and staff to Captiva.

Doris and her husband are involved with numerous philanthropic causes. One that is a natural connection for them is the Leukemia Cup Regattas, which raise money for leukemia and lymphoma. They've hosted several regattas at the St. Charles Yacht Club in south Fort Myers and have been national sponsors for five years.

They contribute \$25,000 each year from their course profits and then provide between 18 and 20 courses to be auctioned off each year at various events across the country. As part of the Offshore Sailing School's 50-year celebration checking on actual date in January they will host a major Celebrity Pro-Am regatta at the Pink Shell Beach Resort and Marina on Fort Myers Beach, which also hosts an office of

the sailing school.

When not running an international business, volunteering with local charitable groups or out sailing with her husband, Doris does occasionally relax at home. One might think their home would boast a magazine-worthy nautical design like something seen in the pages of Coastal Living, but surprisingly, that is not the case.

When the Colgates moved off Sanibel a few years ago to the Iona/McGregor area in south Fort Myers, “We wanted to build a house with more Southwest elements and to showcase our artwork,” Doris says. She developed a love for Southwestern art and culture on a vacation with Steve more than 20 years ago.

“The colors out there are phenomenal,” she says. “The contrasts between the clouds, the vivid blue of the sky and the adobe houses are gorgeous.”

Christin Collins, senior director of development at Lee Memorial Health System, who met Doris at a fundraiser for the Golisano Children's Hospital of Southwest Florida, says she believes that many people don't realize the Offshore Sailing School is not just a local company.

“It's an international company,” she says. “Through Doris' vision it has become so important to the industry.

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