

Betting big on riverwalk, duo launches school

By **CHAD ERIC WATT** Senior Staff Writer

SANFORD — Starting a business in the largest construction zone east of Interstate 4 involves even more risk than a usual small business startup.

But the new riverwalk project now under construction in Sanford actually helped convince a retired engineer and accountant to dive into a new business — built on boats.

Willie Blevins and wife Denise Burchard opened Fun Maritime Academy this summer. The sailing school is the second phase of a three-part sailing business venture.

“I’m on a new mission to turn this lake into the new sailing center of Central Florida,” says Blevins.

It’s been nearly 20 years since the Sanford marina had a sailing school.

In the early 1980s, business was good, recalls John Lucarell, harbor-master at Monroe Harbour Marina.

More sailboats rented slips at Lucarell’s marina, and the lake was a bit busier.

Subsequent construction projects,



Photo by Tanya Lundine

Laura Graham, left, and D.J. McCabe crew aboard a sailboat from Fun Maritime Academy.

including a 1.2-mile seawall along downtown Sanford, have temporarily hurt business on the harbor island. But that’s acceptable, given the end result of the riverwalk project, a massive \$10.5 revitalization now under way.

“Eventually, it’s going to help everyone in the whole downtown area,” Lucarell says.

Bob Hopkins, the owner of the Rivership Romance, agrees. “The

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riverfront is going to be phenomenal for us," he says.

Smoother sailing

Blevins has been sailing seriously since about 1985. He helped found a sailing association for Lake Monroe.

But sailing wasn't Blevins' first choice in water transportation. He grew up in Missouri, where his dad got him

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into white-water canoeing.

Working in Florida for the former Sawtek Inc. microchip company, white-water rapids were hard to come by.

As he sought out river rapids for his canoe in Florida, it dawned on Blevins: "There are a lot of lakes here."

A wide and even waterway, Lake Monroe is considered ideal for learning to sail: fairly shallow and not boisterous.

The lake's shoreline in Sanford is a bit messy right now, but that's because

of the massive revitalization project under way there.

The city hopes to finish the first phase of riverwalk improvements by early 2004.

Blevins and Burchard hope to have all three phases of their own business in place prior to that.

The first phase was their boat rental business, including motorboats and some simple sailboats.

They've followed that with a sailing school. In one weekend, weather permitting, the Fun Maritime Academy can certify landlubbers as sailors.

The third phase of the business is a boat club operating on something like a time-share arrangement.

That venture is modeled on a large and successful operation in the sailing mecca of Annapolis, Md. Members pay a fee and can reserve a boat for their use. The local club fleet will include a collection of 20-foot to 25-foot sailboats.

That operation should be opened up by October or November, Blevins says. The actual price is still in the works, but he says the membership fee will be less than the price of renting a spot at the marina.

"We're confident that'll be the ticket," Blevins says. "It's the key to everyone's happiness — especially mine."

Plenty of room

Other inhabitants of Lake Monroe believe that more sailing on the lake will give them all a lift.

The owner of the biggest boat on the lake is a fan of their work as well.

Passengers aboard the Rivership Romance enjoy seeing sailboats out and

about, says Hopkins.

"They'd rather see that than a powerboat," says Hopkins, who lives aboard a sailboat with his wife.

Says Burchard, "Everyone on the island is real supportive."

The city has been helpful, too.

To start their business, the couple had to apply for an occupational license. There's no specific license to teach sailing in Sanford. The city instead issued Burchard and Blevins licenses that say simply: "Teach anything."

But there's only one thing the duo wants to teach.

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Fun Maritime Academy opened its doors for boat rentals and classes on May 30. Its first graduates finished on June 29.

It's not all skimming along on wind and water. There's a classroom element to learning to sail. But bored students haven't been a problem. "It's not like we're teaching geography," Blevins says.

Students are excelling. One recent graduate crewed with Burchard in a sailing race and took the top prize.

When the riverfront project brings new people to town, Hopkins says, the lake has room for them: "You've got 9,000 acres to sail on," he says.