

SENTIMENTAL JOURNEY: Boblo boat may sail again

Doctor plans to restore the Ste. Claire to include movie theater, restaurants, bars

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Dr. Ron Kattoo's childhood was filled with sun-soaked trips to historic Boblo Island, where he spent summers dancing, picnicking and riding on roller coasters with friends and family.

Since the Canadian-owned amusement park shut down 13 years ago, Kattoo, a hard-charging doctor at **Henry Ford Hospital**, has followed every development regarding the island and the magnificent steamboats that transported him there.

The 100-year-old vessels that chugged up and down the Detroit River to the island south of Grosse Ile have exchanged hands numerous times since they were built.

Today, a New York investor owns the Columbia. The Ste. Claire is in the process of landing in Kattoo's hands for restoration and use for dining, parties and cruises. It's a dream he's had since he saw the boats in 2004 sitting in a shipyard in Lorraine, Ohio -- where they had been deteriorating since they were retired when the island park closed to the public in 1993. The island is now home to a luxury condo project.

"I'm sure it will make a lot of money," Kattoo said. "But it's more than that. I want to bring the Boblo boat back to Detroit, where it belongs and where people will enjoy it the most."

Kattoo, associate director of Henry Ford's intensive care unit, and his **Maximus Corp.** -- which he formed with friends Stephen Najor and Nicole Orow -- are in the final stages of acquiring the boat from Diane Evon.

Neither party is disclosing how much the boat cost. Evon and her former husband, John Belko, paid \$21,000 for it in September 2001. The Cleveland couple spent \$600,000 in restorations. They've run the boat as a haunted house while it was docked in a Toledo shipyard.

Kattoo's chance to buy the Boblo boat came this summer, after the couple divorced. Evon, who acquired the boat in the settlement, was running out of money and time to dedicate to the project.

"I couldn't move the project forward aggressively on my own," Evon said from her Cleveland home. "I also wanted someone who wanted to see her restored for her historical value," she said about the 200-foot Ste. Claire, which was built in 1910 and holds 2,416 people. "Someone who had an emotional connection was absolutely critical to me. Ron has that."

Kattoo had been preparing for this. He befriended Evon when he saw the boats in 2004. When she offered to sell the Ste. Claire, he phoned his wife, Danielle, 30, and his friends, Najor and Orow.

Let's do it, they all said. That reaction is typical of people who know Kattoo.

At 39, he is in charge of one of Henry Ford Hospital's most demanding departments. Kattoo, married for three years and with a 10-month-old son, just finished a book titled "Critical Care Made Ridiculously Simple."



Dimitrius Clark, 50, of Detroit, left, pauses while Dr. Ron Kattoo, 39, of Bloomfield Hills scoops up some trash while working late last month on the Ste. Claire, a former Boblo boat that Kattoo and his associates are buying. The vessel is docked for repairs at Ironhead Marine in Toledo. Kattoo plans to open the boat for dining, moonlight cruises and parties. (Photos by MADALYN RUGGIERO/Special to the Free Pre)

He's a member of Independence Township's volunteer fire department. Several years ago, the Bloomfield Hills resident survived a bout with bladder cancer and lost a kidney because of the treatment.

"He has amazing ideas and achieves what he sets out to do," said his wife, Danielle. "He really doesn't stop. That's why I fell in love with him."

His drive comes from a deep place, she said.

"His mother died of cancer when he was 16 and then he had cancer," she said. "He worked really hard to get where he is right now. And I think he wants our son to be financially secure."

On any given day, Kattoo is handling blueprints and paperwork for the Coast Guard or other government agencies that must approve any work to be done to the historic boat.

"I think working in an ICU allows you to handle many complicated situations," he said. "You're handling 30 patients at once, and there are so many things that are out of your control. It makes a project like this seem relatively simple."

Kattoo already has taken over the project. He and his business partners ran the Nautical Nightmare haunted house this fall. When that shut down, he started lining up architects and contractors to get his fantasy boat going.

He has been making trips to Toledo before storing the boat for the winter, prepping it for the construction that starts this spring. This all happens between long hours at the hospital, managing a household and being a father and husband.

Kattoo's plans for the boat, which he expects to complete by the spring of 2008, are grand.

He will keep the haunted house as an annual fall event. He is also restoring the boat into a sparkly floating fantasyland of restaurants, clubs, movie theaters and bars. He will rent it out for proms, weddings and private parties. He will revive the moonlight cruises.

According to his business plan, the main deck will have four private suites available for rent.

The second deck will have a ballroom; the third, restaurants. The outer deck will have open-air seating, a bar and an outdoor theater. Somewhere, the boat will have a museum that highlights its history.

Kattoo said he plans to finance the project with his and his partners' money. He's also seeking investors and sponsors. Because of the boat's historic status, he's applying for restoration grants, private support and venture capital.

Gloria H. Davis, a 76-year-old Riverview resident who rode and enjoyed the boats in her youth and adulthood, said she can't wait for the project to take off.

"I think it will draw lots and lots of people because those boats are icons in this area," Davis said. "Those boats represent happy times. My husband taught my oldest daughter to polka on one of those boats. I hope to live long enough to ride on the Ste. Claire again and dance on her ballroom floor."

Kattoo's priority is to move the boat to Detroit as soon as possible, so Detroiters can benefit from the work generated by the boat's restoration. He's looking for a place to dock it.

"No matter where this ship is docked, people who come across it recognize it and tell me their stories," said Kattoo. "They'll say, 'This is where I had my first kiss,' or 'Some of the best times of my life were spent on this boat.' "

"Some people go into medicine for the money. Others do it for a more altruistic reason -- helping people. I see this very much as the same thing. This is my way to give something back and make people happy."

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