

For 80 years, the Strong family has made a living and life on the water.

In these parts, a telltale sign of spring is the return of the osprey in late March. As the fish-eating raptors begin to build their homes in preparation for breeding and raising a family, members of the marine community stir to life alongside the waterfront nests. Workers unwrap the protective plastic that keeps out dirt and moisture from boats over the winter. Hulls are painted, decks are redone and engines are tinkered with. Vessels are trailered around the docks and hoisted into the water — first the big commercial boats, with captains eager to get to work; then the recreational craft, their owners feeling the pull of the sea as the warm days multiply. An entire industry of businesses here store, repair, refurbish and sell watercraft and all that goes along with it — and for 80 years and counting, that's been the stock and trade of Strong's Marine.

Jeff and Re Strong, 35-year residents of Mattituck, are the current owners of Strong's and purchased the venture from Jeff's father, Dave, in 1992. Their sons, Ryan and Jay, work for the family business as well — both started around age 10 like their father; Ryan is a vice

president with the company and Jay serves as a board member.

While much has changed on Eastern Long Island, the lure of the sea has remained. Sustaining and expanding the family business has been a labor of love for the Strongs, who are closing in on a century of experience on the water.

ALL IN THE FAMILY

Like many multi-generational families in the area, the Strongs all grew up on the water. Helping other families enjoy boating, as they have for decades, is second nature.

Stewart Strong launched Strong and Holland Marine in Lindenhurst in 1945. The business moved east when his son, Dave, established Strong's Marine on Camp Mineola Road in Mattituck in 1965 with his wife, Dottie, who was a pivotal part of the business. Dave was an accomplished and devoted technician, sometimes working until late at night to repair a client's boat so it would be ready for them the next morning. His love of the East End's sea-centric life also led him to



From left: brothers Jay and Ryan Strong with parents Re and Jeff Strong.



work as a bayman, clamming and scalloping on Peconic Bay and often taking his son, Jeff, and daughter, Nancy, along for the ride.

As he grew up, Jeff kept working in the family business, starting in sales while still in high school and continuing as he attended evening college classes. A mutual friend introduced him to Re, who lived in Southold with her mother and fisherman father.

"We were married in September 1978 after the busiest part of the boating season," says Re. "We got married on the beach and left the ceremony by boat." Their family grew with the arrival of their sons, Jay and Ryan, and Re held a series of local jobs to make ends meet, including a stint at John Ross's eponymous restaurant.

In 1992, Jeff and Re acquired the Mattituck Bay property and promptly got to work, taking on the day-to-day aspects of the business and then some. Re became involved with the Association of Marina Industries, a Long Island nonprofit that runs training programs and conferences for the industry. For 10 years, she also organized a boat show in the Shinnecock Canal.

Re handled accounts payable for the business for over 20 years and now serves as Strong's "well-being manager" — that is, as a liaison between employees and management, taking care to treat workers as extended family. Jeff is president of the company and a past chairman of the board of directors of the Marine Retailers Association of

the Americas, a national group that offers a host of resources to the marine industry, including scholarships and training programs for the marine industry's workforce. He has served on the MRAA board since 2013.

While working with family is sometimes difficult, the Strongs have been able to do it successfully. "It is nice to be able to see each other often," says Re, "but it is challenging." For Ryan, it's about finding the sweet spot of working both within the business and within the family. "After a while you iron out the particulars," he says. "It's mostly about communicating with each other."

They all share a deep common interest in fulfilling the needs of their customers the way Stewart, Dottie and Dave did. For the last four years in a row, Strong's has earned the national Elite Fleet Award for marinas with outstanding service and exceptional customer satisfaction.

"Not all marina owners are boaters — it could be just an investment for them," says Jay. "We are unique because we are boaters first and own the boating lifestyle facilities."

GROWING TO MEET THE BOATING BOOM

Over the years, the popularity of recreational boating has greatly increased, with NOAA's Office for Coastal Management reporting that



tourism and recreation make up 86% of New York State's marine economy, worth \$27.2 billion in 2021. Suffolk County has three times the number of boat registrations than any other county in the state, according to a 2023 report from New York State's Parks, Recreation and Historic Preservation. John and Re wisely saw the opportunity in the region's enthusiasm for watercraft, and in 2000 they added a showroom and marina in Southampton. In 2013, the couple seized another moment, taking over and renovating the former Matt-a-Mar Marina in Mattituck, now Strong's Water Club and Marina. And they've continued to grow, with other locations in Cutchogue, East Hampton, Fire Island, Port Washington and Freeport.

Work in spring and fall is the most demanding, especially because Strong's services boats of all sizes. "We start as small as 18 feet here; we offer the whole spectrum of boats. The average size boat at Strong's is 30 feet," says Jeff. Service remains the same regardless of size and the marina will help with boat launches and winterizations, quick repairs and preventive maintenance, all of which enable clients to use their boats more often.

"To make people's family dream on the water happen, you need support. If you have a problem, you can get on the phone and reach out to a Strong, and we do the best we can to make it right," says Jay. "We've built a level of trust and comfort for clients."

Strong's can also arrange for lessons for new boat owners about operating their craft safely. "Women on the Water" classes that focus on navigation, boating basics and docking are offered to accommodate a growing number of female boat owners, while boating safety classes taught by state-certified instructors are open to the community.

There's also the boating lifestyle, something the Strongs understand well. When Ryan lured his non-boating wife, Tiffany, to spend time on the water one summer, "she realized that when you go down to the dock, you actually talk to your boating neighbors and they become good friends because you share a similar interest," Ryan says. "When you go to a mooring or on short trips together to Connecticut or Shelter Island, that is the lifestyle that is relaxing ... and you're back home on Sunday."

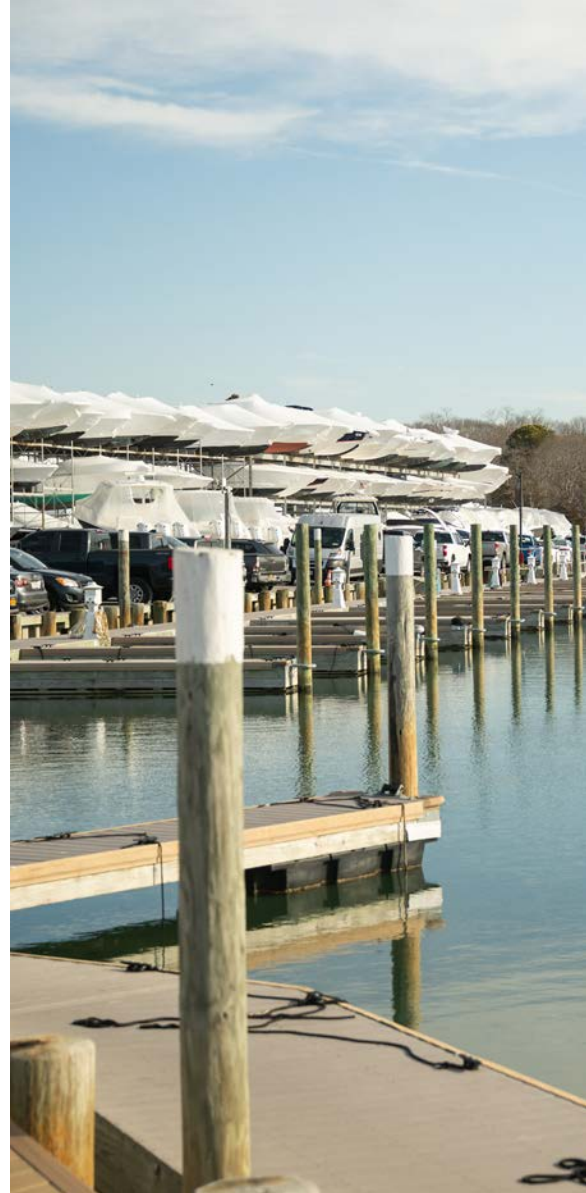
It's a community that Strong's both embraces and encourages.

"Some clients work locally. They are happy to hang out on the boat at the marina. Some people like to sit and read their paper, some like to smoke a cigar... it creates a [neighborhood] feeling when you go down to the dock," says Jeff. "During the summer, Re and I often go out and get dinner from Braun's and go out on the boat around 4:30 or five o'clock and float out on the bay or the Sound. It's just fantastic. It can be as simple as that."



Strong's offers a variety of
high-quality boats for sale.





FOSTERING LASTING RELATIONSHIPS

Along with longtime clients, Strong's has employees who have been with them for decades. The business employs 125 people across all locations; the number rises to around 160 during the summer season.

Jon Acosta, the company-wide shop foreman at Strong's, has been working in the industry since 1997 and for the Strong family since 2004. "Because I love what I do and where I work and have the support of the people around me, it certainly can make the job feel like it's not a job at times," he says. "When I joined the company, Jeff and Re were both very active in the day-to-day operations and I worked with both of them literally every day; they attended my wedding in 2006 and watched my family grow into what it is today. My four kids have all received birthday presents every year on their birthday from Mr. and Mrs. Strong. The generosity the Strong's have extended to my family is just another reason why I love my job."

Indeed, creating a work culture of support and mutual respect has inspired Strong's employees, and they know how fortunate they are to have landed in such an environment.

Longtime yacht support manager Ted Webb lives in Mattituck and has worked at Strong's for over 10 years, five of which he spent as general manager during the Strong's Water Club renovation.

"This is a dying breed of family business," he says. "Working with the family is a privilege. They are truly committed to their employees... it's unique that Jeff and Ryan get their hands dirty. It's good to see a local business flourishing."

It's a two-way street around the marinas. For Jay, the long-term employees sometimes feel a lot like grandparents who often have yarns to spin about working with his actual relatives, like his grandfather Stu, among other priceless reminiscences. "The family connection is huge," he says.

STEWARDS OF LAND AND SEA

The health of the East End ecosystem isn't lost on the family, who has folded several environmentally focused projects into their business over the years. At Strong's Yacht Center in Mattituck Inlet, Cornell Cooperative Extension's Marine Program has installed "FLUPSYs," or floating upweller systems, to grow out juvenile oysters and hard clams. They look like floating docks but contain a submerged motorized propeller that circulates water through thousands of juvenile shellfish contained in barrels.

"There's been a long friendship with Jeff Strong and Cornell Cooperative Extension throughout the years. In the early 2000s, we



"This is a dying breed of family business," says Ted Webb, longtime employee of Strong's.



had a couple FLUPSYs at the Strong's Mattituck Bay location," says Mike Patricio, hatchery manager for the Town Shellfish Enhancement Program. Patricio notes the Mattituck Creek site is a great location for growing shellfish, with its exchange of plankton-rich Long Island Sound water that provides the nutrition needed for clams and oysters to grow quickly.

"Over the years, we've planted clams and oysters in Mattituck Creek, and you can see there's a reoccurring population of adult oysters along the banks and bulkheads," he says. "The population of shellfish in the creek help keep the waters filtered and contributes to the overall health of the marine ecosystem."

Kate Rossi-Snook, Cornell's Back to the Bays Aquaculture Coordinator, notes that "in 2024 we raised and seeded a total of 130,000 oysters and 2.3 million hard clams in our FLUPSYs! We are incredibly grateful for our ability to operate our FLUPSYs in Mattituck Creek, and the value of letting us take up an entire slip during boating season is not lost on us."

Another environmental improvement at Strong's Mattituck Bay and Mattituck Inlet locations is a low-sill bulkhead. Instead of protecting shorelines from erosion with a full-scale bulkhead, the low sill is made of concrete or rocks placed parallel to the shoreline and then

planted with wetland vegetation behind it, in effect creating additional marsh to naturally protect the shoreline. This "living shoreline" technique is a lower-cost method that is more adaptable to sea level rise and more eco-friendly, too, attracting shore birds, juvenile fish and eel and housing algae and mollusks that filter the water. Jay notes that the Strong's were one of the first to install such a system on the East End and describes it as "a win-win to widen the basin and quadruple the wetlands. It's great for the inlet."

FAMILY TIME

Will they hit 100 years? Perhaps. There is indeed a next generation of the Strong family growing — Ryan and his wife, Tiffany's, son Bradley, 12, and their daughter, Skyelar, 9; and Jay and his wife, Laura Beth's, daughter, Eliza, 8.

But business or pleasure, it's the love of the water that saturates the family.

"We try to make the boating experience terrific," Jeff says. "We love being out on the water and we like helping other families get out on the water and experience it." Re agrees, noting that "we take it personally to make sure they enjoy it." Much the same as Jeff's parents and grandparents did. 🦋