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AMY BETH BENNETT/STAFF PHOTOGRAPHER

Albury Brothers Boats has added a bigger boat and a half-dozen workers.

## Boat builder riding wave of success

### Albury Brothers Boats of Riviera Beach adds to line

BY DOREEN HEMLOCK

Staff writer

Jeff Lichterman is expanding his boat-building business in Palm Beach County based on love.

While visiting the Bahamas years ago, the long-time boater fell in love with sturdy fiberglass powerboats made on a tiny island there. He asked the family making them for a license to produce the center-consoles in Florida.

Now, as sales of Albury Brothers Boats grow, he's adding a larger 33-foot model to the line, investing close to \$500,000 and hiring half a dozen people at his operation in the Riviera Beach area.

"I wanted to be in the marine industry since I was this high," said Lichterman, his hand at his knee. At age 11, he'd already written a top yacht maker asking to be their dealer. By his 40s, he was marveling at the way Alburys stay level when cruising, without rolling or banging. "It just speaks to your soul."

Boat builders have been fleeing South Florida for years to cheaper locales, but a rebounding U.S. economy now is boosting business for those producers that remain in the area, industry leaders say.

Albury Brothers can thrive in expensive South Florida for two main reasons, Lichterman said.

First, the company sells its premium product direct to consumers, so middlemen

don't take a cut from the sales. And second, it makes relatively small boats, so it can build inland and bring the boats by trailer to waterways for test rides and delivery. Makers of large boats may not do that as easily.

"If we were on the waterfront, we'd be squeezed out" by the high price of land, Lichterman said.

Albury also remains a niche business, with small-scale and hand-crafted production.



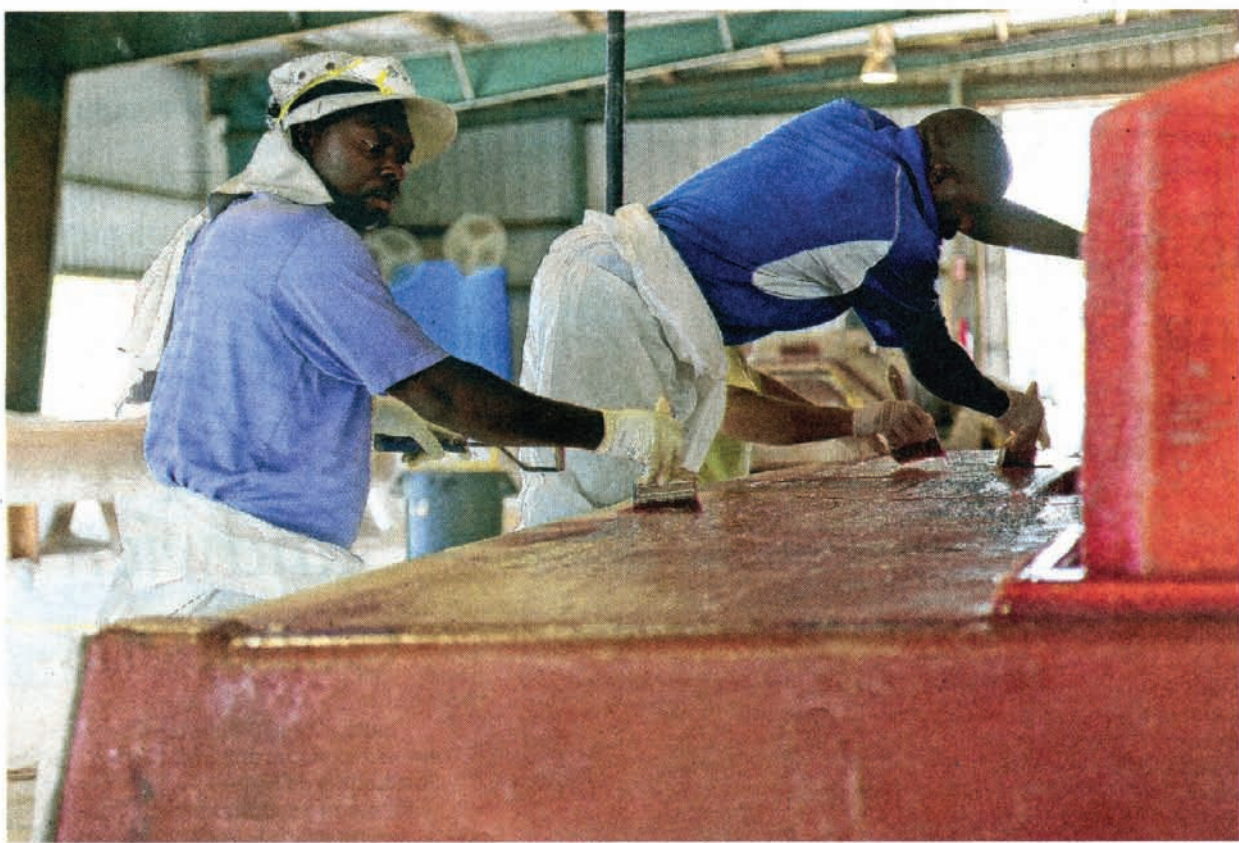
Jeff Lichterman is president and owner.

\$160,000 each.

For industry leaders, Albury's expansion reflects both the resurgence of the boat business overall since the recession ended — marine sales roughly doubled in Palm Beach County from 2010 to 2014 — as well as the popularity of its specific product known for classic design and pride in

Last year, the South Florida operation made 32 boats, and even with its expanded line, it won't double that number, Lichterman said. He expects to make about a dozen per year of the 33-footers, which sell for an average of \$225,000 each. That's on top of dozens yearly of its 20-, 23- and 27-footers, which sell for average prices from \$60,000 to

See **BOATS**, 4D



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Roland Orelien, from left, Leo Altidor and Paul Velasquez apply resin to fiberglass.

## BOATS

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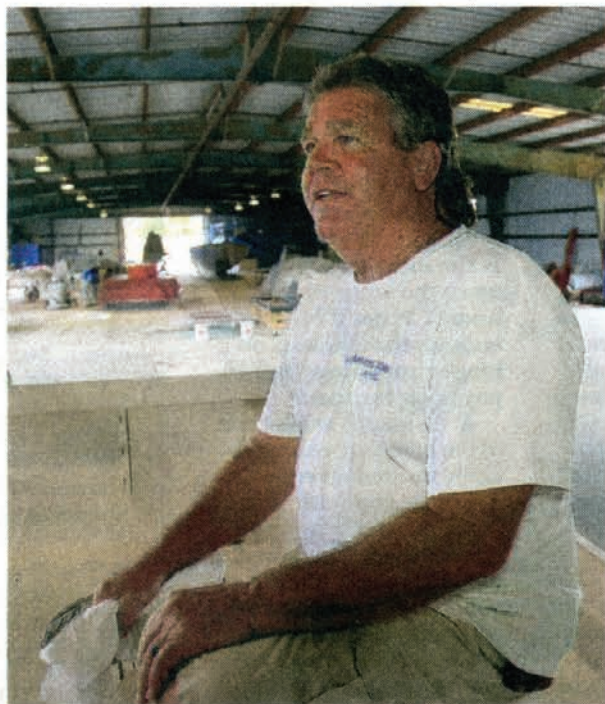
craftsmanship.

"Albury builds great quality boats," said Chuck Collins, executive director of the Marine Industries Association of Palm Beach County, praising the boatmaker's attention to detail in the way it lays its fiberglass coatings to craft strong hulls. "And they follow up with service."

"They've built a very loyal following for their high-end-finish boat," said Phil Purcell, executive director of the Marine Industries Association of South Florida. "They have clients that have moved up from their smaller boats. The hardest thing is to get a client, and they already have them built in."

Ted Schiff, a 51-year-old physician from Palm Beach Gardens, just bought one of the new 33-foot Alburys to replace his 23-footer and to provide more space aboard for his young children.

A long-time boater and avid fisherman, Schiff likes the Alburys for "their simple design for low maintenance," with "no fancy teak or unneeded drawers." He also admires their durability. His 8-year-old Albury, which he kept outside and used regularly, "looked almost as good as it did the day I bought it," Schiff said. And it sold quickly for 75 percent of its purchase price, holding its value better than many other brands.



Ross Lehman is general manager at the Riviera Beach boatbuilder.

Buying local was an extra treat for Schiff. He liked stopping at the shop to pick out what he wanted, from color finishes to electronics and even a change in the hull to fit a larger fish-finder device. He enjoyed visiting to see progress on production. And after delivery, he was pleased to call the boss for the typical tweak needed to a hatch, receiving what he called "excellent customer service."

Like Lichterman, Schiff first came across Alburys when visiting the Abacos portion of the Bahamas archipelago. He saw how the rental fleet of the boats on tiny Man-o-War cay — lo-

cal population: about 300 — stood up well, despite years of heavy use by visitors.

For the Alburys, it was a long road from South Carolina to boatmaking on Man-o-War. Loyalists during the American Revolutionary War, the family first was granted land to move to what's now Florida when the region was briefly controlled by the British. When the Spanish took Florida back, they were given property instead in the Bahamas, a British colony until about half a century ago.

One branch of the Alburys began making wooden boats on Man-o-War for

several generations and later switched to the fiberglass ones that drew the interest of visiting American boaters, Lichterman said.

To be sure, Albury's business has faced some choppy waters in Palm Beach County.

When demand for boats plunged during the recession, the company cut back to four-day weeks and allowed extended vacations for employees, Lichterman said. Even so, it fared better than some boatmakers that had lots of inventory at retailers, needed to take back what didn't sell in time and had to halt new production.

From the start, the local government has supported the business, steering about \$200,000 in federal funds from community block grants in the early years to develop operations launched in 2003, he said. And customer response has been strong, helping expand the staff to about 20 today.

The chance to create boats and share with buyers makes coming to work fun for Albury craftsman Kendrick Shouldeen, 52, of West Palm Beach, who grew up on the water in Trinidad in the Caribbean.

"I love building boats," Shouldeen said. "Every one is a challenge. These boats are hand made."

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