

## Music legend taps Dunedin specialty boat builder for project

BY JANE MEINHARDT  
STAFF WRITER

**DUNEDIN** — Zeke Durica thought his company's pinnacle of success was delivery of an Ensign Classic to a client in Japan.

That was before singer-songwriter James Taylor called.

Taylor wanted one of Ensign Spars Inc.'s semi-custom sailboats as a birthday gift for his wife, Caroline "Kim" Taylor.

"He researched the boat and contacted me," said Durica, president of Ensign Spars in Dunedin. "He wanted to know all about everything on the boat, down to the type of wood in the tiller. His father had owned a boat that was similar."

Ensign Spars readily accommodated Taylor's wishes and built the boat he named Caroline.

The delivery, birthday celebration and commissioning were far from typical for the small company.

Taylor was at the Tanglewood Music Festival in Lenox, Mass., as a guest on nationally aired public radio program *Prairie Home Companion* with Garrison Keillor on June 30 when the boat was delivered there on its trailer.

Durica and Elizabeth Brincklow, immediate past commodore of the Ensign Class Association and a Tampa Bay area sailor, attended the christening on the lawn at Tanglewood where Keillor did the naming honors.

During the *Prairie Home Companion* broadcast, Keillor sang a song he had created that afternoon in honor of the Ensign. Taylor sang two songs with references to sailing.

"It was just unbelievable," Durica said. "We splashed the boat in Lake Champlain the next day and sailed with James and his family."

### DEPTH TO THE CLIENT ROSTER

In a statement regarding his Ensign Classic purchase, Taylor described the sailboat as "an excellent craft" and referred to Durica as a professional at executing the construction of Caroline.

Adding Taylor to the roster of Ensign Classic owners was a milestone in the company's growing business, which is one of the few manufacturers in the small area zoned light industrial in Dunedin.

Ensign Spars is the only licensed builder of the Ensign Classic, a 23.5 foot, full-keel sailboat often referred to as "the little big boat" in the yacht industry. It is considered a classic and has a cult-like following with 450 active sailors around the country — and one in Japan.

The company pays a royalty to the Ensign Class Association, which owns the molds for the boats. Pearson Yachts built about 1,770 Ensigns between 1962 and 1983 and later declared bankruptcy.

Durica started restoring Ensigns for clients at the 7,000-square-foot plant he built in Dunedin and then began building new ones to class specifications in 2000.

A basic new Ensign with a trailer costs nearly \$38,000 and features 18 different upgrades, including closed-cell foam construction, from the original boat.

The company has two full-time em-



KATHLEEN GABBLE

Zeke Durica is president of Ensign Spars Inc. in Dunedin, the only licensed builder of the Ensign Classic. He polishes an Ensign sailboat going to a client in Massachusetts.



COURTESY OF ENSIGN SPARS

James Taylor, right, presents his wife, Caroline 'Kim' Taylor, with a boat for her birthday, as they celebrate with their twin sons, Henry and Rufus.

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**Zeke Durica**, President  
Ensign Spars

ployees and 50 area vendors and suppliers, including businesses involved in making sails, woodworking and fiberglass coatings.

Durica operates three business segments at Ensign Spars — selling Ensign parts, restoring old Ensigns and building new ones.

"We're at the point where we're going to need more help," he said. "We did \$15,000 in parts alone in a month. People don't

even ask how much a part is anymore. They just order it. The repeat business is unbelievable. It's been a zoo."

### AGAINST THE CURRENT

The small company is bucking the current downward trend in the marine industry brought on by rising consumer prices and less discretionary spending. Retail sales are down more than 10 percent in certain categories of recreational boating products.

Illinois-based Brunswick Corp. (NYSE:BC), one of the largest recreational boat and marine products manufacturers, said last month that boat sales this year are the weakest since 1965.

Wellcraft Marine in Sarasota recently laid off 70 workers.

Ensign Spars has been unaffected by the downturn and at times has a waiting list for new boats. "The economy doesn't affect the kind of clients we have," Durica said.

The company is something of an anomaly in Dunedin, said Robert Ironsmith, the city's economic development director, who was unaware of Ensign Spars' activities.

"Wow, that's interesting," he said. "We're primarily a residential community. We have a lot of retail and hospitality here except for that small pocket of industrial area. I don't think we have any other boat builders."

For Patrick Painter, owner of Dunedin Woodwright, handling the marine carpentry for Ensign Spars means "working with guys that do top of the line work."

Ensign Spars currently builds six new boats a year but has the space to expand its production. The company has cut its 10-week production time almost in half, Durica said.

"When we deliver a boat on a trailer somewhere, it stops traffic," he said. "People crowd around the boat. I could sell them on the road."