

After blow from Ian, Offshore Sailing School makes a big comeback

Laura Layden

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When Hurricane Ian hit, it threw the Offshore Sailing School off course.

The near-Category 5 hurricane destroyed the school's head offices off McGregor Boulevard in south Fort Myers, flooding it with an unexpected 6 feet of storm surge.

Not only did the owners lose office files, furniture and equipment, but cherished memorabilia they had collected over nearly 60 years in business, from newspaper and magazine articles



This is a view of Offshore Sailings headquarters after Hurricane Ian.
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to awards and trophies recognizing their success as sailors and entrepreneurs.

The storm soaked scrapbooks, wrecked paintings and obliterated thank-you notes from graduates.

Thinking about the loss of such irreplaceable memorabilia, brings sadness and heartache.

But there's a silver lining to the storm: Owners Steve and Doris Colgate have charted a new course for their business – and it looks to be a good one.

After Ian heavily damaged all of the school's partnering resort and marina sites in Southwest Florida, forcing every one of them to close indefinitely, the

Colgates set their sails on growing their offerings elsewhere.

That included St. Petersburg, a few hours away, where they already had a base of operations at a Hampton Inn, near the downtown waterfront.

Since the storm, the school has repositioned boats, added instructors and expanded courses in the city, known for its pristine coastline and sunshine. The investment is paying off better than expected.

Nearly 100 students who signed up to take courses on Captiva Island or Fort Myers Beach, or in Cape Coral, and couldn't after Ian hammered all of those

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locations, got rescheduled and rerouted to St. Petersburg, or to the Caribbean Islands.

The school also has teaching sites on Scrub Island and on Tortola in the British Virgin Islands.

New location in Southwest Florida unveiled

On Monday, a little over four months after Ian, the school announced it has inked a deal to resume instruction in Southwest Florida.

The new site is at Tween Waters Island Resort & Spa on Captiva Island. Courses will begin on March 1. At the resort, the school will offer three-day Learn to Sail courses and weeklong bareboat cruising courses, along with sailing lessons – for visitors and locals alike – on 26’ to 45’ sailboats and yachts.

“Offshore Sailing School is thrilled to welcome visitors and residents back to Sanibel-Captiva Islands and support other businesses welcoming guests to the beaches, islands, and neighborhoods of Fort Myers and the greater Southwest Florida area,” Doris Colgate said.

Often, students take courses as part of a “learning vacation,” so the school has been a draw for tourists over many decades.

Across its locations, the school offers U.S. sailing and powerboating certification courses at all levels. One of its more popular courses is called Fast Track to Cruising, which prepares students for big boat ownership and charter cruising on their own.

The school also provides race courses and corporate team building and leadership development programs, and hosts sailing vacations.

Timing of Ian made a difference

For the Colgates and their business, the timing of Ian turned out to be rather fortuitous.

The week before the hurricane hit Southwest Florida the owners organized Offshore U, an immersive all-company meeting.

The multi-day event took place at the South Seas Resort on Captiva Island, one of the school’s former instruction sites, with nearly 30 employees attending from all locations, for learning, bonding and fun.

Employees heard updates on curriculum, fleet, sales, marketing and operations, and participated in social activities, including a cruise to Cabbage Key.

Little did they know, the group would be one of the last to visit and enjoy South Seas before the iconic resort took a beating from Ian, requiring a massive re-



Offshore Sailing School’s employees gathered a week before Hurricane Ian hit for a multi-day corporate event on Captiva Island. SUBMITTED

build, said Beth Oliver, the Offshore Sailing School’s director of sales and marketing.

As employees first gathered in Southwest Florida, it looked like the hurricane might make landfall in the Tampa Bay area. But then came its fateful turn.

The timing of the corporate meeting – held bi-annually – turned out to be beneficial, with employees getting to know each other better and gaining more respect for one another ahead of Ian, resulting in a faster response to the catastrophic storm – and a quicker recovery, Oliver said.

Owner Doris Colgate, who serves as the company’s president and CEO, wholeheartedly agreed.

“Five days of living together. That’s a rare thing for a corporation to do,” she said.

She added: “Teambuilding is one of the biggest strengths from us getting together.”

Before returning home from the companywide meeting, operational teams from St. Petersburg and the Caribbean took action to help secure and protect boats.

“It was really all hands on deck,” Oliver said.

The company meeting occurred Sept. 18-23.

Ian made landfall in Cayo Costa, an island off the coast of Fort Myers, on Sept. 28.

After the storm, when insurance adjusters came to assess damage to the boats in Southwest Florida, they applauded the school for the “best secured fleet they had ever seen,” Oliver said.

“They said it’s a case book example of what to do, she said.

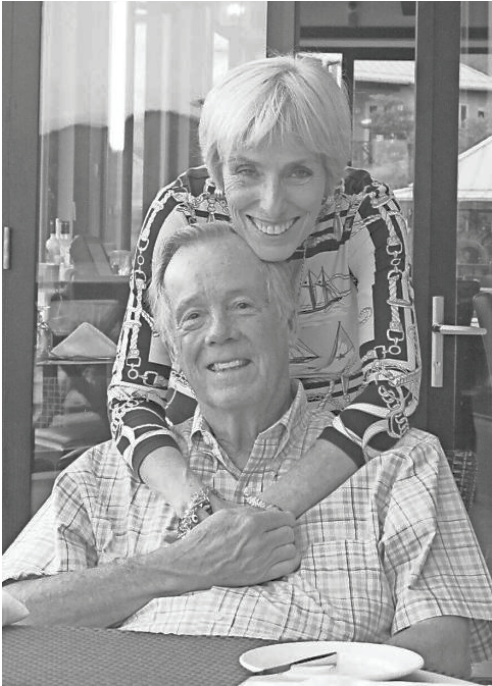
Out of 24 boats in Florida, two sank, one got totaled and another disappeared. The lost and destroyed vessels were all Colgate 26s – co-designed by Steve Colgate, an Olympian and America’s Cup racer and sailing hall-of-famer, and Jim Taylor, a renowned naval architect.

The sailboats were thought to be unsinkable, until Ian.

“When the shrimp boats got loose on Fort Myer Beach, they might have severed a couple of our Colgates,” Oliver said. “We don’t know.”

“All in all, we did OK,” she said. “And all of our staf

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Doris and Steve Colgate SUBMITTED



Hurricane Ian destroyed the Offshore Sailing School's headquarters in Fort Myers. SUBMITTED

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were fine, except for some damage to some people's homes."

Boats are back in action

Every boat in the fleet touched by the storm in Southwest Florida had "some sort of damage" from Ian, but much of it could be described as "cosmetic," Colgate said.

"This is a costly repair situation," she said. "But we are almost through with that."

Indeed, most of the boats are "back in action," Doris Colgate said.

Two weeks after Ian, the school had a strong showing and sales at the U.S. Sailboat Show in Annapolis, Maryland.

Not long after that the business and its owners celebrated an important milestone.

In November, Doris joined her husband in the National Sailing Hall of Fame. He was inducted in 2015, for his racing career and leadership in sailing educa-

tion.

Not only has Doris been at the forefront of sailing instruction, but she has been a leading advocate for women in sailing.

While much of the Colgates' memorabilia has been lost forever, Doris is thankful to have scanned nearly all of their important photos.

She did that for a book about the couple, called "Offshore High," written by Herb McCormick and published in 2021.

So, at least they have a digital version of their photos - and the book.

Steve founded the sailing school in 1964. Originally headquartered in New York, the enterprise moved to Fort Myers in 1988.

The school has more than 160,000 graduates.

Not business as usual

After Ian destroyed their headquarters of nearly 35 years in Fort Myers, the Colgates found a new one farther inland. Their suppliers moved quickly to restore their operating systems and provide new equipment,

helping them get back on their feet quickly.

With their expansion in other markets, the duo has hired new instructors in St. Petersburg and the British Virgin Islands.

They've added a new Jeanneau 440 cruising yacht and Lagoon 40 catamaran to their Florida fleet, along with putting another Moorings 4500 catamaran a Scrub Island.

They continue to eye new locations and boats.

"It's not business as usual. It's an 'expansion and change' business," Colgate said.

The company has navigated through rough seas and it's making a comeback.

"It's all good. It's all good. It's just very tiring," Colgate said.

After a lot of hard work, she sees smoother sailing ahead.

"We are finding our rainbow," Oliver said.

For that, Steve credits the strong commitment and can-do attitude of the company's entire team, who've put their hearts and hours into the recovery effort.

"It's been an extraordinary effort and we see many bright things on the horizon," he said.