

## Engineer just wanted to build something fun



Worker Vladimir Filatov puts hoses on a power pack for a boat lift at Sunstream Corp. in Kent. Twenty people are employed building the lifts.

## Out of a boat lift has arisen business that floats on its own

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Ken Hey, an engineer and entrepreneur who designed jet engine mounts for The Boeing Co., made his first boat lift in 1996 for his Lake Washington home.

Requests from curious — and envious — neighbors led Hey to begin small-scale production of his solar-powered, remote-controlled boat lifts in his Bryn Mawr garage.

After a trip to the Seattle Boat Show in 1997 generated orders for more than 50 lifts, however, demand drove Hey out of his garage and into full-scale production.

“When we started out, we knew far more about the customer than we did about the industry,” Hey said. “I think that was a big advantage for us.”

Hey’s small company has grown quickly. Last year, Sunstream sold

400 to 450 boat lifts and accessories, generating revenues of more than \$3 million. The company now employs 20 people at its production center and corporate headquarters in Kent.

And expansion may be in the works.

At the Seattle Boat Show, which begins next week, Hey and his company will introduce a brand new kind of boat lift that floats.

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The lift will allow the company to expand into new markets. The company's current lift, though popular in Lake Washington and Lake Sammamish, doesn't work in places where the water level fluctuates more than a few feet.

"Now we'll be able to offer the product, which was limited to lakefront boaters, to all boaters," Hey said. "It's a greater market for us and a greater reach."

The primary benefit to boat lifts, Hey said, is that they allow owners to store the boats out of the water. That protects the boats and saves the owners from the tedious and costly task of repainting their boats every year or two. It also reduces the need for expensive hull maintenance.

The lift also potentially has some ecological benefits, according to Patricia Graesser, a spokeswoman for the Army Corps of Engineers in Seattle.

"The bottom line is that the impacts of the services we are most concerned about were the pilings — what they are made of and what they are or are not treated with," she said. "The pilings also essentially provide hiding places for predator fish who eat endangered species."

Chris Ketzal, Sunstream's chief financial officer, said that the company hopes to sell as many as 1,000 floating boat lifts this year.

The floating lifts come in two sizes: One capable of supporting up to a 6,000-pound boat retails for about \$9,000, while a larger lift, that can hold a 9,000 pound boat, costs about \$15,000, Ketzal said.

Sunstream plans to take its boats lifts on the road, visiting more than a dozen trade shows in January and February.

A big white board in the company's corporate offices plots out the shows, listing the cities and dates in brightly colored markers.

This week Hey and his wife, Deborah, who is the company's general manager, will head to New York, for one of the country's biggest boat shows. Other representatives from the company are attending shows in Atlanta and Portland.

Ketzal said the shows are particularly important because sales made there and leads generated by

those attending potentially account for up to 60 percent of a company's business in a given year.

In addition to promoting its products at boat shows, Sunstream has also propelled itself on to the national scene by working with a large network of dealers.

The company now sells its products to more than 70 boat dealers and dock builders around the country, Ketzal said, though it does its own installations and distribution on Lakes Sammamish and Washington.

George Zick, who owns Waterfront Marine Products in Lake Geneva, Wis., said he's been carrying Sunstream's lifts for about a year.

"I'm associated with a dock builder out here and sell a number of other lifts, but (Sunstream) products seems to be the most reliable," Zick said. "It pretty much sells itself. It's easy to operate with the remote control and solar power."

As the company continues to grow, Hey said he has just one regret.

"The cruel irony is that whole story behind the boat lift is that I built it so that I could boat more often," he said.

"Now that the company has taken off, I'm rarely home before sunset."

