

A Model Captain

Big isn't always better when it comes to this local captain's boats



by Emma Kalka

Sunlight spills into the orderly den and plays off the carefully polished wood of the miniature fleet of fishing boats that covers the walls and tables. From the painted hulls to the detailed decks, it is obvious that someone with a deep love of boats has invested many hours of delicate work and devotion in their construction.

"I read about boats, I build boats, I live boats," says Tom Kaplan, Sanibel resident, builder of the tiny flotilla, and real life boat captain.

Kaplan began building model boats three decades ago, and today his collection consists of thirty models of different types of fishing boats, from the early 1800s to modern times. The collection rates its own room in his house, along with his maritime books and memorabilia.

Each boat features a different construction technique and requires 150-200 hours to complete. His current project, a Maine lobster boat, has wood panels on its deck that were individually cut out and put in place. A paddle wheeler made entirely of matchsticks took Kaplan eight months to build from scratch. "It was

immensely challenging," he says.

Kaplan's friends tell him he has salt water in his veins. He grew up in a "boating" family on an island in Little River, Florida, where he learned to fish and boat at an early age. In high school he often took his boat to school. "All I ever wanted to be was a boat captain," he says.

Kaplan realized his dream and is now a contract captain and an instructor for Sea School. He is also a U.S. Coast Guard 100-ton master captain. And when he is not aboard a boat, he is building a model of one. "This isn't about money," says Kaplan. "I do this because I love it." 🦋

PHOTO BY EMMA KALKA

Giving Hope a Facelift

A local surgeon reaches out to enrich the lives of suffering children



by **Chelle Koster Walton**

Fort Myers cosmetic surgeon Robert Brueck wanted to put his talent and experience with trauma victims to use for the benefit of Third World children. Through a friend in the Dominican Republic, he discovered that a children's hospital in the capital city of Santiago was planning to open a burn unit.

"I went for the first time ten years ago," said Dr. Brueck, "and then waited for the burn unit to open. In that part of the world, *mañana* can take a long time. It finally opened about a year and a half ago."

In late summer 2005, after dedication of the burn unit, Brueck went down, rolled up his sleeves, and went to work. Many of his patients at Dr. Arturo Grullon Children's Regional Hospital are severely scarred, having lost use of limbs and other functions in home fires caused by substandard heating and cooking methods.

During his early visits, Brueck also became involved with an orphanage-missionary school for which he raises funds through his Fort Myers practice. "Rather than [have patients] pay me, I'll do the surgery, [and they] make the check out to one of these projects," said the good doctor. "The patient benefits tax-wise and by knowing the money is going to a good cause."

Brueck returned to Santiago in November 2005 and later had Christmas presents sent for the kids at the children's home, which ministers to more than 430 youngsters. "It's hard to get gifts down there for all those kids. Friedrich [Jaeger, *Times of the Islands* publisher], with his airline connections, was able to fly toys down at no charge," said Brueck. "We were able to bring down a ton of toys so every kid got one or more for Santa to give out."

Jaeger also provided air transportation for Brueck's last visit in March 2006, when he performed reconstruc-

tive surgery on, among others, a boy who couldn't walk due to burn scarring.

To date, Brueck has treated around 40 children and raised in excess of \$100,000 for the children's home, plus thousands of dollars more through a program where participants can sponsor a child for \$10 a month. 🐦

Chelle Koster Walton is travel editor for Times of the Islands and writes on the subjects of cuisine and travel. She also writes for Miami Herald, Caribbean Travel & Life, St. Petersburg Times, National Geographic Traveler, and other publications.

More Info

Anyone interested in contributing to this worthy cause should contact Dr. Brueck at Associates in Cosmetic Surgery, 239-939-5233.