

Coastal Connecticut - Summer, 2016

President of Mystic Seaport Draws Inspiration from His Grandmother

Perhaps the best-known Connecticut landmark to outsiders is Mystic Seaport. A multi-faceted museum covering 19 acres, it is home to four National Historic Landmark vessels, a collection of more than two million nautical artifacts, and will open a bold new exhibition building in the fall that resembles a curling wave. Overseeing it all is a tall, lean native of coastal Maine who had a 27-year career at Fay boarding school in Massachusetts. Stephen White thought he retired in 2008. But the chance to combine his love of teaching and the sea was irresistible. He talked with Coastal about the challenges and satisfaction of running an iconic institution.

You were a headmaster for 18 years at Fay School. Are there any similarities between running a school and running an historic institution like Mystic Seaport?

“There’re many more similarities than differences. It begins with mission. It’s about education and raising one’s understanding; in the case of a school it’s raising understanding of knowledge in young people. In the case of Mystic Seaport we’re raising the understanding of maritime history, our country’s maritime heritage. It’s what makes this job so fulfilling.”

What is your proudest accomplishment here?

“Overseeing the restoration of the Charles W. Morgan – the last remaining wooden whaling ship in the world. She came to Mystic Seaport in 1941. She was a relic, she was a hulk. Fifteen years ago the museum concluded the time had come for a major restoration. Then we thought: why not explore the idea of taking her back to sea – let her live again as a ship. In 2014, we did.”

What was significant about that voyage?

“There were several milestones. (The last); We sailed into Boston Harbor adjacent to the Constitution. (So you had) the oldest naval ship, the oldest commercial ship. Two icons of American history together for the first time. That was a defining moment in my life in many respects.”

What will be the new building’s first exhibit?

“Sea-Change. We chose that theme because the building is a sea change. It’s a 21st century building. What this building is a symbol for, what the exhibition will be a symbol for, is the sea change happening at the museum. We weathered the storm of the recession and it’s a new day dawning. We’ll have 10 objects that represent some sort of sea change in maritime history.”

Was there an experience early in your life that influenced what you are doing now?

“My connection to this place goes back to my grandmother. I grew up on the coast of Maine. When I was five or six my grandmother read me the book, *Sailing Alone Around the World*. It made a deep impression. So in my first boat at eight, sailing around the little harbor (in Camden), I was thinking about sailing around the world. So it’s been my calling and I like to think my grandmother instilled something in me, in my soul.”

What is a charity that you’re committed to?

“Locally it would be Safe Futures in New London. It’s an organization set up to deal with domestic abuse. It’s something that’s very important to my wife. She opened my eyes to the significant issues of domestic violence and abuse and the great work that Safe Futures does to save lives and help women put their lives back together after being taken advantage of. I’m so impressed with what they’re doing.”

What advice would you offer college graduates today?

“Commit to something that somehow enhances the lives or experiences of others. I can think of nothing more fulfilling than to teach, to educate, to interpret. I’d love to see an America where doing good is the priority.”

How do you spend your leisure time?

“My wife and I love to garden. We’re passionate about travel and love good food. We spend a lot of time with plants and flowers. We live in Stonington. We love it here (all along the shoreline). There is a lifestyle here, a substance to a lifestyle here that we’ve not experienced. It’s just spectacular.”