

ALUMNUS PROFILE

Larry Acheson, '83, Nautical Entrepreneur Joins Gow's Board of Trustees

by Rick Ohler



Larry Acheson, '83, is the kind of alumnus you hope will someday join your Board of Trustees. Infectiously enthusiastic, affable and successful, he brings not only a wealth of experience, but a measure of gratitude as well, to the task of helping his alma mater navigate the challenges of the 21st century. And, he's a fascinating guy to boot, having managed to turn his boyhood love of boating and his independent spirit into a unique career. A few years after graduating from Gow, Larry founded Offshore Marine Towing, now TowBoatU.S. Fort Lauderdale, a marine towing and salvage company that plies the waters off the eastern coast of Florida, the Bahamas and beyond, giving aid to boaters in distress and providing all kinds of support for the commercial and private shipping community.

But what most inspires Larry Acheson's service to Gow as a new trustee is his experience as a young man here thirty years ago.

Larry arrived in South Wales in the fall of 1980, not, however, by choice. "My parents pretty much brought me here in a straitjacket," he says only half jokingly. "And they pretty much took me out the same way. I wasn't what you would call a model student." As more than one veteran faculty member recalled, Larry was a fighter. He concurs. "My response to everything—frustration, boredom, rules, conflict—was physical." He came very close to not making it through Gow. "In the summer between my junior and senior years at Gow, I ran away from my home in Port Huron, Michigan. I was living in Fort Lauderdale, Florida, with no intention of returning to Gow. Things were going great. I had a job, a car, an apartment, but I promised my dad I'd return to Gow to finish my high school education and I'm glad I did."

As much as Larry wasn't always the happiest (or the most cooperative) student during his days at Gow, he knew that something positive was happening to him. "When I'd go home on breaks and I'd be in a social situation with other kids, and they'd ask me about school, something came over me. All of the sudden, I'd straighten up, stand a little taller, and tell them about Gow and the small classes and wearing a coat and tie and going to evening study hall. I expressed a kind of pride that surprised me. I obviously knew, even if subconsciously, that I was getting the education I needed."

It wasn't long after he graduated that he began to understand the value of his time at Gow. "I realized pretty quickly that the staff here had gotten it; they had understood me. As committed as they were to the kids with learning disabilities, they were also just as committed to kids like me who needed discipline more than remediation. And what I needed more than anything was discipline and boundaries." He is profusive in his appreciation for the teachers who influenced him when he was such an angry young man: then Headmaster David Gow (who, he says, "taught me how the world works"); Dan Kelley; Rob Garcia; his dorm parents, Paul and Kathy Rose.



From Gow, Larry didn't follow the traditional path to a college degree. "It took me years not to get through college," he said. But the skills and attitude that he had developed at Gow gave him the confidence to embark on the adventure that became TowBoatU.S. Fort Lauderdale. One day he was cruising off Fort Lauderdale and he came upon a fellow in a broken down boat. He rigged a tow rope from his boat and pulled him safely ashore. He had done this as an act of kindness, but the stranded boater gave him fifty dollars. "Hmm," Larry thought. "I wonder . . ." And the entrepreneurial wheels began to turn in his head. For a young man who always knew that he was destined to be his own boss, this was all the encouragement he needed.

Larry began to spend his weekends looking for boaters in distress who needed a tow. He had a crude sign made for his twenty-four-foot Privateer that said "Offshore Marine Towing," although, as he recalls, the sign maker didn't plan carefully and for years the sign actually said, "Offshore Marine Towin." Gradually word of Larry's penchant for nautical rescue began to spread. In 1989, Offshore Marine Towing joined the BoatU.S. (Boat Owners Association of The United States) towing program and became one of the first TowBoatU.S. companies in South Florida. And the rest, as they say, is history. Today Larry's TowBoatU.S. Fort Lauderdale maintains a fleet of over a dozen boats ranging in size from twenty-four-foot rigid-hulled inflatables to thirty-one foot JC custom hulls, to a ninety-six-foot steel-hulled salvage vessel. They allow him to provide a wide range of services to a customer base that spans South Florida from Delray Beach south to Miami and east into the Bahamas, as well as other long distance ventures.

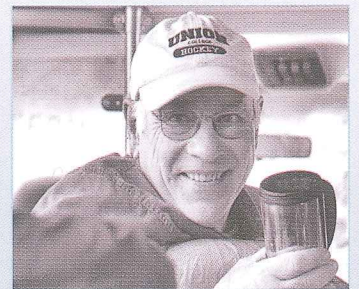
His staff numbers over fifty and includes divers, mechanics, riggers and nautical engineers who are on call twenty-four hours a day, seven days a week. One of his newest hires is Govian Jordan Walker '08, who is now a patrol captain, further proof of the efficiency and value of the Gow network. With Larry at the helm, TowBoatU.S. Fort Lauderdale has successfully helped with hurricane evacuations, on-board fires, recoveries of stolen craft, re-floatation of sunken boats. The next time you watch "Pirates of the Caribbean," (the part where the pirate ship rises from the bottom), you'll be seeing TowBoatU.S. Fort Lauderdale's handy work. A few years ago, Larry took on fuel spill containment duties for cruise ships refueling at eastern Florida ports of call. Visit www.towboatusftlauderdale.com for some amazing photographs.

With a dedicated and professional command structure operating at TowBoatU.S. Fort Lauderdale, Larry has found that he can take time to cruise the waters of the East Coast and the Caribbean. And, recently, he has discovered that he wants to spend time back in South Wales, too.

"I wasn't too involved with the school for a long time. I'd send some money now and again, and if there was a Gow alumni dinner nearby, I'd try to go. But then my son enrolled in the Summer Program. And Gayle Hutton, the Director of Development, reached out to me." Before he knew it, he was on the board.

Headmaster Brad Rogers says, "Larry brings so many skills to the board. He has a clear passion for what Gow did for him and we are fortunate that he wants to share some of his talent and time with Gow. Larry is diplomatic and has a sense of humor that adds much to the board. He understands the big picture. As a member of the Development Committee, as well as a generous donor, he is a terrific asset to the school."

Although much of his time at Gow these days is spent in meetings with fellow trustees and Gow staff, Larry is drawn to the students whenever he's on campus. As a former student himself, and as a student who struggled and resisted but ultimately prevailed, he has earned a credibility that present day Govians, as well as his peers on the board, recognize and respect. Welcome aboard, Larry.



Writer Rick Ohler is a lifelong friend of The Gow School and frequent contributing writer to *Gow Life*. His first book, "Have You Lived Here All Your Life? Not Yet" was published last year by Right Field Books. Visit www.rickohler.com.