



Stories

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Dockmaster semi-retires to Epping Forest

by Liz Daube

Staff Writer

During his five years as Jacksonville's dockmaster and waterways coordinator, Steve Nichols didn't always have it easy.

Early one pre-Super Bowl morning, he turned on the television just in time to see news coverage of a cruise ship's arrival — almost two hours early. At a Sail Jacksonville festival, he watched in horror as a 295-foot-tall sailboat got caught in the current, lost its anchor and nearly slammed into the Main Street Bridge.

"There were some harrowing moments," said Nichols. "I had people tell me, 'God, I'd love your job.' The thing people probably don't realize is what it takes to put on, say, a fireworks display. They see a 10 or 15 minute show, and that's about a six hour event."

Nichols was responsible for maintaining the city's waterfront facilities and coordinating boating events. He worked with other agencies, like the Fire Department and Coast Guard, to make sure events proceeded safely and smoothly.

Nichols recently left his position with the city. Today, he works as harbormaster for Epping Forest Yacht Club, organizing their boating activities. Nichols said he misses his City job's variety of people and projects, but he was ready for a change.

"This (yacht club position) is kind of my semi-retirement job," said Nichols. "It's a slower pace, less intense."

Boat-related work is a recent development for Nichols. He used to own his own company, and he was retired when he moved from Kansas to Jacksonville in 1999.

"This is a second career for me," said Nichols. "I sold my business and retired because I wanted to be around water. At that point in my life, money wasn't as important as what I was doing."

The city dockmaster job enticed him because he wanted to play a role in preparing for the Super Bowl. Nichols said his unique combination of boating experience and higher education helped qualify him for the job: He has a Coast Guard master's license and a master's degree in business administration.

Right now, Nichols is organizing the DuPont Cup sailing regatta for Epping Forest. He said he's been boating for 35 years, so he loves his work.

"I'm around boats, I'm right here around the marina," said Nichols. "I don't have any retirement plans right now."

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