

Still Selling After All These Years

CALIFORNIA CANOE AND KAYAK OFFERS PROOF THAT THE GOOD GUYS CAN PERSEVERE

By Joe Jackson

LISTENING TO TAMMY

Borichevsky tell California Canoe and Kayak's history has a lot in common with watching a well-done, feel-good movie. The main characters—owners Borichevsky and her husband Keith Miller—along with a supporting cast of retail employees and local boaters are well-developed. You cheer for them when they gamble on using computers in the early 1980s and it pays off. You are on the edge of your seat when the 1989 earthquakes in the Bay Area destroys their shop and halts the entire operation. And in the end, the story leaves you with that happy feeling when the good guys win. The fact that this retailer, with three locations in Northern California, is still chugging along after 36 years of business warms your heart.

The main difference between a feel-good movie and California Canoe and Kayak's history is that there is no room for the creeping suspicion that your feelings have been manipulated. In California Canoe and Kayak's case, the protagonists win for realistic reasons.

"The fact that we have been around for 36 years tells you that we are a good company," says Borichevsky. California Canoe and Kayak's staying power is proof that straightforward business practices, a true dedication to paddlesports, and a genuine care for your community can breed long-term success in a competitive market with very slim margins.

California Canoe and Kayak's story starts in the '70s when Don Bowman bought a little canoe club from Anne Dwyer, who went on to start Kiwi Kayaks. Miller partnered with Bowman in 1982, bringing a background in whitewater inflatables.

Few boaters lived in the Bay Area back then. The era and area had no demo days or sales reps. Business was rough for paddlesports retailers. Instead of moving into a more lucrative industry, however, Miller took a proactive approach to stimulating business. He bought an old trailer from Sawyer Boats, attached it to his Ford F-150 pickup, and drove up and down the Bay Area spreading the gospel of kayaking.

"I figured since the shop wasn't well-known, I had to bring paddling to the people," Miller says. "I couldn't assume that they were going to



California Canoe and Kayak's 15-year Oakland location.

come in on their own."

This type of forward thinking, coupled with their geographic location near Silicon Valley has helped keep California Canoe and Kayak ahead of the technological curve. California Canoe and Kayak began using computers for inventory and other business needs back when Apples were green screened. "Keith sold a \$3,000 canoe and was so excited to buy more product," says Borichevsky. "Don [Bowman] went out with that money and bought a computer when no one else had one."

While this frustrated Miller at the time, the computer gamble paid off with increased efficiency ahead of their time. While other retailers were struggling to transition to computer use, California Canoe and Kayak had been using them for years.

Another technological advance that they got the jump on, thanks to their location, was they were one of the first paddlesports retailers to have a website. Twelve years ago California Canoe and Kayak's program director, Jay Armstrong, launched their website.

"I wish we had bought more domain names," Borichevsky says.

Today, California Canoe and Kayak focuses on making e-commerce as convenient as it can be for their customers.

"E-commerce is a service to our customers," says Borichevsky. "Our customer base is all of Northern California."

California Canoe and Kayak also has updated their point-of-sale system and sells what is on the floor rather than have another showroom. This cuts down on confusion and mistakes in terms of what is in stock.

While determination and forward thinking have helped California Canoe and Kayak succeed, their story is not without the hardships that other retailers face.

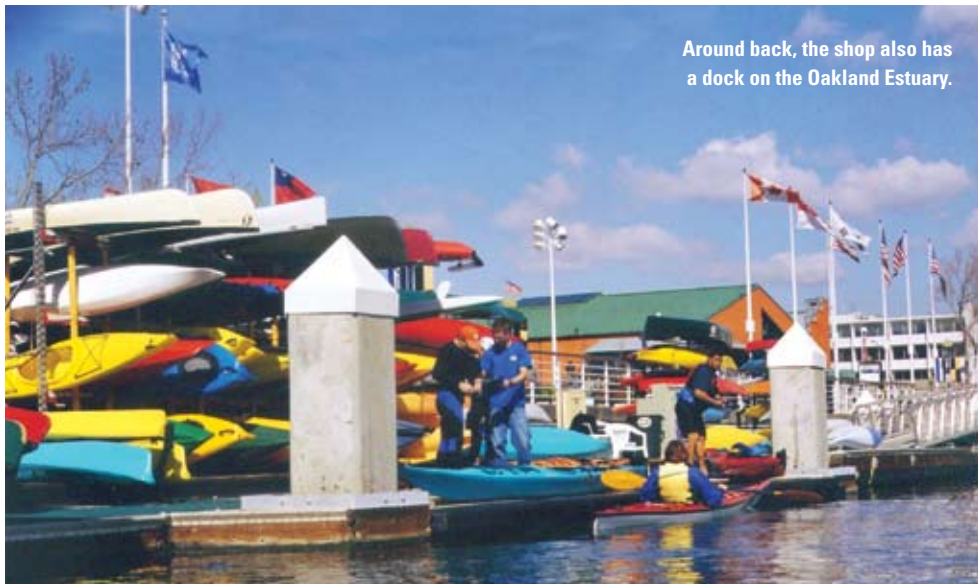
"In retail, it is a real challenge to hire people," says Borichevsky.

Avoiding continuous staff turnover is particularly difficult in the Bay Area, where the cost of living is so high. One of the ways they combat this, as well as keeping their staff trained, is to hire paddlers or make an effort to hire young employees and foster a love for paddling in them.

"Some high school kids who we have trained have become really good salespeople because of their love of boating," says Borichevsky. "That little spark is key."

Byron Saylor, a 21-year-old whitewater and sea kayaker, is the type of employee that Borichevsky likes to hire. He first came into California Canoe and Kayak as a customer four years ago and began working at their Oakland location six months ago.

"They [Miller and Borichevsky] are both really great employers," says Saylor. "They are really knowledgeable and a great resource for me."



Around back, the shop also has a dock on the Oakland Estuary.

Borichevsky and Miller have made a concerted effort to make a positive impact on the world around them. They were recycling kayaks (see the September/October 2007 issue of *Paddler*) in the '80s long before "going green" was considered a marketing term. They also have organized Support Strokes, an event that has raised almost \$200,000 to support the fight against breast cancer.

"That was with a small number of people," says Borichevsky. "You know, paddlers are good people."

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