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Launching ahead of the Rest

My alarm sounds at six o'clock. I struggle to get out of bed, as the sun isn't even up yet. I wander through my dark house prepping myself for the day ahead. My brain is too tired to think, so I call upon instinct to guide me through my morning routine. Once I've eaten my mandatory three bowls of Lucky Charms, showered, dressed, and prepped my bag lunch, I quietly sneak out of the house, careful not to awaken my parents at such an early hour. My exit does not take me to the driveway where my pickup eyes me longingly, but to our dock where a twelve-foot Starcraft sits eagerly in the placid waters of early morning Broad Cove in Yarmouth, Maine. The sun has begun its daily ascent, and the sky is turning a serene orange, perfect lighting for my drive to work. Ten minutes of smooth riding later, I arrive at Handy Boat Service in Falmouth. I smile when I spot the two launch boats, *Harold* and *Margaret*, moored just off the dock. My job is to operate one of these launches (I prefer *Harold*) and transport Handy Boat customers through the mooring field to their yachts or sailboats. I live for work at Handy Boat: it's one of the best summer jobs that a college student can have.

Summertime is supposed to be a fun and relaxing time away from the textbooks and papers of the school year; the atmosphere at Handy Boat perfectly matches this ideal. People are constantly smiling, laughing, exchanging stories, and looking for ways to have a great time. I can recall an abnormally scorching afternoon at Handy in mid July. Because it was well upwards of 100° and humid, I'd had a rush of customers looking to cool down on the ocean earlier in the day

and was left suffering in the heat while I awaited their return. My older coworker, Spike, suggested that I take a launch out and go for a swim to fight the heat. I couldn't believe my ears. I hadn't thought that that was an option. Handy Boat employees are given a uniform to wear that includes khaki shorts and a polo, so a bathing suit seemed to violate the dress code. Once I had changed, I hopped in the launch with Payson and Adam, two of my younger coworkers, and we cooled down in the brisk Atlantic waters. This not only refreshed my body but also my enthusiasm for my job. For the times when business is slow and its not quite warm enough to go for a swim, Handy Boat still manages to keep employee morale high. There are iPod speakers in the dock house that will inevitably get turned on if there's ever a lull in the excitement. On several afternoons, various genres of music could be heard across the harbor. Whether it was Bob Marley, Jimmy Buffett, or Kenny Chesney, the music always uplifted my spirits and reminded me of just how great work at Handy Boat really is.

In addition to the relaxed atmosphere that Handy Boat employees create, the customers contribute to the happy vibe by being friendly and interesting. It's easy to tell that many of these customers have been stuck behind an office desk all week and the opportunity to take a break from that stressful environment makes them ecstatic. In the few minutes that they're on board with me, some customers will tell me an array of stories about themselves and their families or their adventures at sea. One such story really captured my interest; an older couple was admiring the dock house, the launch, and the scenery around Handy one afternoon. I spotted them, and as is routine, I asked them if they needed anything or any help. The old woman told me that they were just visiting Handy Boat after having been away for so many years. Apparently they used to come to Falmouth in their childhood and would spend their summers on the same docks that I do. I offered to give them a ride in one of the launches, the very same ones used back in the

1940s when they summered here. The couple graciously accepted my offer and the three of us toured the mooring field as I listened to stories from their adolescence. The old man rattled off statistics about the local islands and living conditions around Maine during the Second World War. He told me about giant underwater nets that were placed between islands to try to catch German U-boats, which completely amazed me. I was fascinated with these stories and many more. When we finally returned to dock, I realized we had been gone for an hour, more than twice what I had thought. The man's first hand history lesson had caused me to completely lose track of time, a testament to the casual and intriguing nature of Handy Boat customers. Each day at Handy Boat provides an opportunity to see familiar faces whose ultimate objective is to have fun and emanate happiness throughout the summer.

The people aren't the only ones responsible for creating a relaxing and fun atmosphere to work in; the weather aids in this effort as well. Maine's weather can be unpredictable. Temperatures can fluctuate but tend to stay at a comfortable 70 to 80 degrees. Summer thunderstorms, or Nor'easters, infrequently darken a summer afternoon. But regardless of the erratic weather, conditions are generally warm with a light sea breeze. This works well for my job, as I get to spend a lot of time outdoors. An added bonus to working outdoors is the bronze tan I acquire spending countless hours in the sun. My friends who are trapped in restaurant kitchens all summer are noticeably annoyed that I don't share in their pale miseries. Consequently, being in the sun really defines summer for me. I can recall one day in the middle of a July week, a slow day considering the beautiful weather, that defined just how nice the weather treats Handy employees. The combination of the sun's warm rays and a refreshing salt air created a dream-like environment. I was able to sit at the end of the dock with my feet dangling in the water while reading one of the James Patterson thrillers that I love. It was a

perfect afternoon thanks to the flawless climate that can be frequently found along the coast of Falmouth.

Even when the weather doesn't cooperate, human nature does. On rainy days, people don't tend to go out on the water, so for the most part, I get to hang in our dock house. Rainy days in the dock house usually consist of reading, playing a myriad of card games, chatting, or impromptu singing as the iPod speakers shuffle through our favorite songs. While these days are less eventful, they still beat a hard day's work elsewhere. On the other hand, some crazy sailors like to go out in the storms, which means I get to dawn our heavy-duty, rubber rain gear: boots, overalls, a jacket, gloves, and a rain hat. For some, this isn't exactly their idea of fun, but after a long afternoon cooped up in a small shack, a brief break from the monotony of the dock house is a treat. Sailing in rough waters with the rain whipping into my face, barely able to see a few yards off the bow, is both exhilarating and nerve-racking. During one storm, I recall struggling to even find one man's boat for a pick-up. I had to deductively find it by using landmarks I recognized around the mooring field. It was a strenuous but invigorating process. This sort of adventurous aspect to the job adds another positive element to it that is all a result of Maine's unpredictable weather. Through fair or foul weather, Vacationland always manages to delight Handy Boat employees.

While the unpredictable Maine weather is always cause for fun, having the opportunity to enjoy it with people my own age makes the experience even better. Nearly all of the people working on the dock or driving the launches are older high school students or in college. Knowing that I am dealing with the same kinds of issues in my life as the person next to me is comforting and relaxing. Consequently, I got a lot closer to my coworkers than I might have had they been years older than me. This is apparent in a camping trip we took during the summer.

Almost spontaneously one night after work, we rounded up a group of about fifteen workers and set sail for an island to camp out on. Working together, we built a fire, set up tents and spent the night telling stories, swimming, and enjoying each other's company. Also, it is a lot easier for me to feel accepted at a new job when people around me have only recently undergone the same awkward first day of work. I know that without my coworker Jack Whitacre, the transition into work would have been much more difficult. Jack is also a launch driver and had been working at Handy for two years prior to my arrival. He went out of his way to help me understand just how things worked around the boatyard. He remembered the nerves caused by the first day of work and had been helped by his coworkers, so it was only right for him to carry on the generous tradition. This ease of my transition into the atmosphere made my time at Handy Boat much more comfortable and less stressful. Jack's mentorship is just one example of the sincere care Handy Boat employees have for one another. Once in the crew, Handy employees are fun and generous and won't ever let a man fall overboard.

In addition to the supportive and fun employees, perhaps the most unique and amazing aspect of working at Handy is the vast array of unpredictable perks that aren't in the job description. These perks are random and appear on a day-to-day basis. For example, the entire crew was on edge one night because we had heard rumor that Matt Ryan, the quarterback for the Atlanta Falcons, was at the restaurant just behind Handy for a dinner party. Our excitement was uncontrollable as we scanned everyone going into and out of the restaurant. Eventually we did catch a glimpse of the celebrity, a treat that added a little flair to the day. Furthermore, my coworkers will often bake goods or a customer will leave off a little snack for the kids in the dock house to enjoy. One of the deckhands, Adam, is known to work miracles in the kitchen. He successfully appeased the appetites of several of my coworkers one afternoon with his bizarre

rainbow cake-like concoction that was absolutely delicious. His sweet treats are weekly staples that never fail to please. Also, there is an opportunity to see new spectacular sites every time I set off in a launch. One day an enormous ship that looked like it had just sailed off the set of *Pirates of the Caribbean* was moored in the field. On another trip out, harbor seals were swimming alongside my launch and poked their heads up to look at me. The vast quantity and variety of these benefits give an added bit of mystery and excitement to each day on the dock making work at Handy that much more inviting.

While other people might claim that their summer job is perfect, the combination of the fun atmosphere, unpredictable yet rewarding weather, caring and friendly coworkers, and constant surprises at Handy Boat Service make work there better than most other companies. If you ever find yourself out of work one summer, stop by Handy Boat and pick up an application; you'll be glad that you did. Now I've got to get some rest, I'm working the morning shift tomorrow.