

# Genius runs in the family

Washington fisherman documents restoration of an heirloom seiner

By Sierra Golden

**D**rive through the shipyard in Port Townsend, Wash., on a warm spring afternoon, and you'll find many commercial boats standing in various states of repair, the sunlight breaking through their rigging. Yard workers and boat owners are painting, fiberglassing, rebuilding engines and installing refrigeration systems. The sounds on the radio clash and meld with the dull thumping of metal on wood as workers pound new ribs into place on an old wooden seiner.

Jason Crosby, the fifth-generation fisherman working on his own boat in this maze of a yard, takes being a Renaissance (fisher)man to a new extreme. Crosby was born in Bellingham, Wash., in 1969 and raised in Friday Harbor. Originally from Denmark, the Crosby family settled in Gig Harbor, and quickly became a successful fishing family.

Crosby and his twin brother, Chris, began fishing at 11 years old, seining Puget Sound on the *Genius* with their grandfather, mother and uncle. "They'd

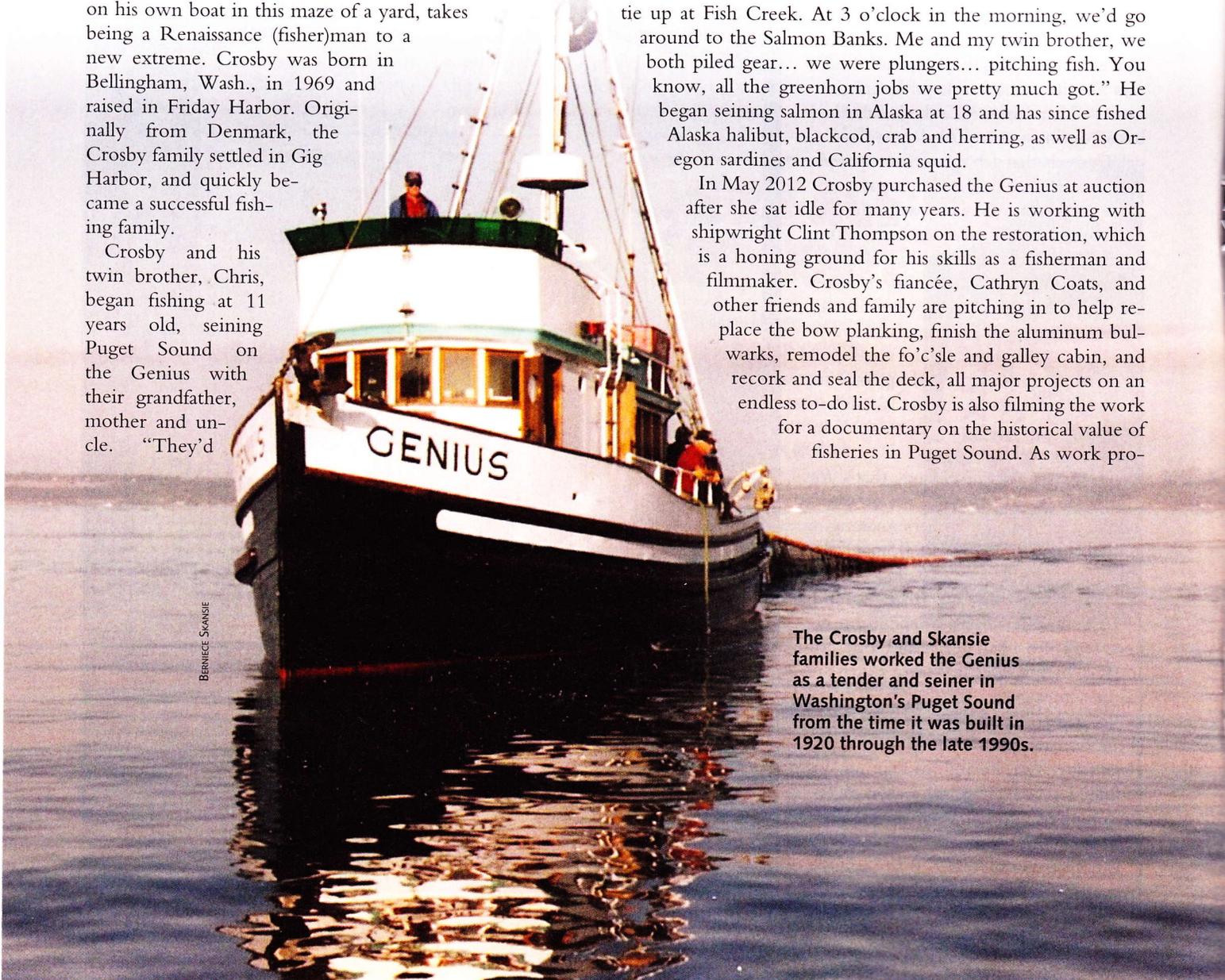


CATHRYN COATS

Jason Crosby and his shipwright will replace this large section of planking on the *Genius*' starboard side.

tie up at Fish Creek. At 3 o'clock in the morning, we'd go around to the Salmon Banks. Me and my twin brother, we both piled gear... we were plungers... pitching fish. You know, all the greenhorn jobs we pretty much got." He began seining salmon in Alaska at 18 and has since fished Alaska halibut, blackcod, crab and herring, as well as Oregon sardines and California squid.

In May 2012 Crosby purchased the *Genius* at auction after she sat idle for many years. He is working with shipwright Clint Thompson on the restoration, which is a honing ground for his skills as a fisherman and filmmaker. Crosby's fiancée, Cathryn Coats, and other friends and family are pitching in to help replace the bow planking, finish the aluminum bulwarks, remodel the fo'c'sle and galley cabin, and recork and seal the deck, all major projects on an endless to-do list. Crosby is also filming the work for a documentary on the historical value of fisheries in Puget Sound. As work pro-



BERNICE SKANSIE

The Crosby and Skansie families worked the *Genius* as a tender and seiner in Washington's Puget Sound from the time it was built in 1920 through the late 1990s.

## Fish to film and back again

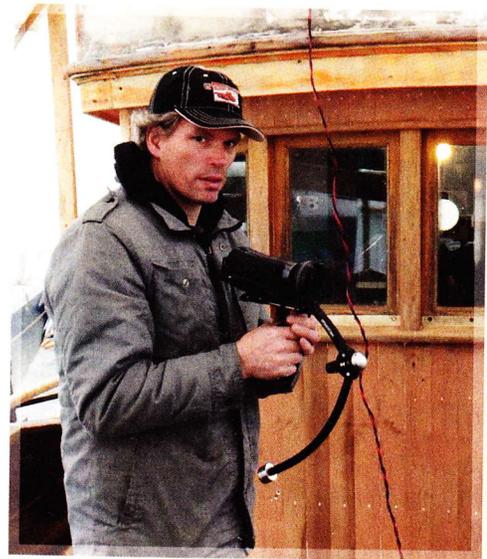
Jason Crosby, a fifth-generation fisherman from Washington, is also known in West Coast fisheries as a talented filmmaker.

"I moved to Atlanta to go to the Atlanta Institute of Music. I went there, and I got a job at Artisan Picture Works," Crosby says.

While living on the East Coast, he continued to fish summers in Alaska and also found time to film parts of the 1996 Atlanta Olympics and dozens of performances at the House of Blues. In recent years he has produced myriad short films on West Coast fisheries. Videos featuring the combative Sitka sac roe fishery, massive squid seine sets and women fishermen in Southeast Alaska have wowed more than 2 million online viewers. Check them out at national fisherman.com.

— S.G.

**Filmmaker, fisherman and wooden boat restorer Jason Crosby aboard the Genius in Port Townsend, Wash.**



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gresses, he puts short films "online so people can see, but I'm also working on the grand documentary — interviewing my family members, having people who know the boat talk about the boat

and remember, so that way I can flash back with pictures and histories. I want to get pretty deep with it."

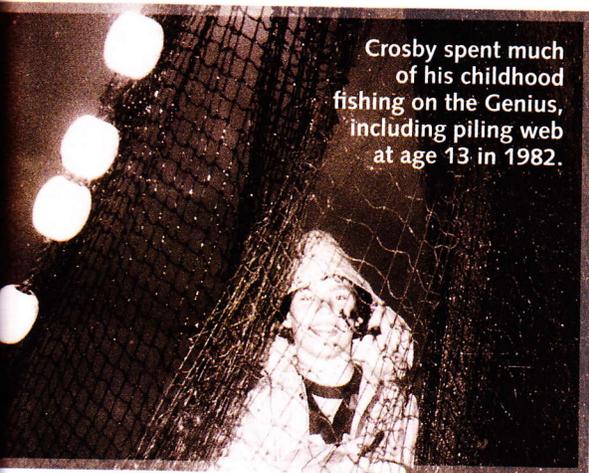
Crosby's purchase of the Genius was like the return of a long-lost family member. The 65-foot boat was owned and fished by Crosby's family for nearly 70 years before it was sold and fell into disrepair. Relatives of Crosby's operated Skansie's Ship Building in Gig Harbor, where the Genius was built in 1920. Together, the Crosby and Skansie families are responsible for building and fishing many of Puget Sound's most recognizable and beautiful wood boats. From 1940 until the late 1990s, Crosby's great-uncles Gerald and Leonard ran the Genius as

a salmon tender and seiner.

In 1998, Tom Nolan purchased the boat and spent nearly three months repairing it. Fifty new frames, 44 new planks and 7,000 galvanized screws went into the hull before Nolan began cruising the San Juans, using the Genius as a pleasure boat. As his children grew older, he left the Genius permanently anchored in Friday Harbor. Crosby credits Nolan's early work for saving the boat from total disrepair while it sat unused and neglected.

Crosby first found the Genius for sale in 2008 for \$15,000. Feeling overwhelmed by his own fishing schedule, he passed up the opportunity to purchase the family heirloom. "I couldn't fit it into my schedule, and it would've just been more of a headache than any-

*Continued on page 37*



Crosby spent much of his childhood fishing on the Genius, including piling web at age 13 in 1982.

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Skansie's Ship Building Co. in Gig Harbor, Wash., in 1927, a few years after the yard launched the Genius.

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thing.” Two years later, he found himself with time to dedicate to the restoration just as the Genius came up for auction in Friday Harbor. Crosby calls it divine timing. “[Squid] seasons are getting smaller, shorter now. It’s getting to where I can spend more time [at home],” Crosby says. He bought the boat — the first he fished on and now the first he can call his own — for \$3,010.

After the auction, Crosby and Coats found a dilapidated boat covered in heaps of debris, garbage and the general muck that accumulates over years of disuse. Still, Crosby

remained excited as he described their first trip to the boat: “Oh, it was a time capsule! Things [my family] had put up were still there... newspapers on the wall, to-do lists.” This sense of heritage is integral to the Genius project. “I would really like to see some sort of history passed on to my son’s generation,” says Coats. “That’s the number one, just having something for when he grows up.”

Crosby has replaced bow planking up to the waterline on the bow and refinished much of the house. He needs to add more structural support to the bow before he can complete the planking, but he plans to have the Genius back to its original home in Gig Harbor, where it will be displayed as an integral piece of community culture. He’s still raising money to complete the restoration ([www.gofundme.com/fqm9c](http://www.gofundme.com/fqm9c)) and hopes to be finished by spring 2014. He would like to fish the Genius with Coats and their 3-year-old son, Chatham, bringing history full circle on the boat he fished as a child.

For now, Crosby is not sure where he’ll fish the Genius — Puget Sound and Alaska are possibilities — but most importantly, he says, “it’s history: how fishing used to be and what the boats used to look like. If people are into that, then this is the boat to be into.”

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Sierra Golden is a seiner deckhand and freelance writer serving as the Island Institute Resident Fellow in Sitka, Alaska.

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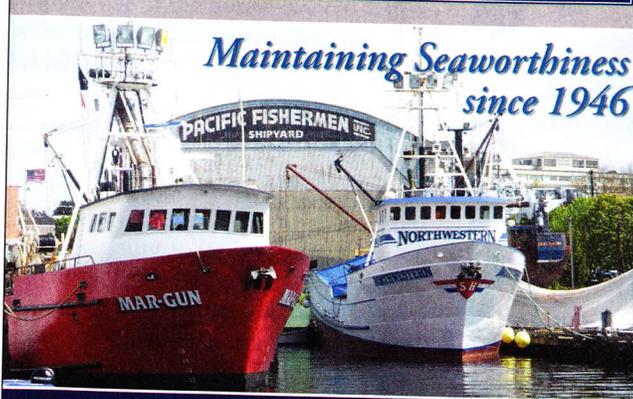
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