

# west coast

# WOMAN

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**Deb Schuck**  
Co-owner of  
Manor Steel Fabricators

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# DEB SCHUCK



She's probably one of the few women in the country who owns her own steel fabrication company—Palmetto-based Manor Steel Fabricators—a company started over 20 years ago that she bought with her husband, John Gough, in 2005. A large, airconditionerless steel shed with the flare of welding sparks and the near skull-splitting sound of steel grinding is her world, her company. So what's a woman like her doing in a place like this, one wonders?

And yes, she wears a steel artificial leg, doing so without a trace of self-consciousness. But Deb Schuck's steel, once you hear her life story, is on the inside.



It's just too obvious. Too obvious to call her a woman of steel. Yes, it's true she's probably one of the few women in the country who owns her own steel fabrication company—this one tucked away on a quiet industrial road in southern Palmetto. And yes, it's also true she wears a steel artificial leg, doing so without a trace of self-consciousness. But Deb Schuck's steel, once you hear her life story, is on the inside.

Deb owns Manor Steel Fabricators—a company started over 20 years ago in Palmetto that she bought in 2005. A large, airconditionerless steel shed with the flare of welding sparks and the near skull-splitting sound of steel grinding is her world, her company. It takes a while to adjust to the spare surroundings, the sounds, the sheer nonfemaleness of the place. Her office is just off the shop floor in a small space with two other desks. There's a computer, printer, copier, fax and hanging files with blueprints. So what's a woman like her doing in a place like this, one wonders?

Her steel story begins with Deb and her husband, John Gough, doing what any couple living in England would do who wanted to get back to some sunshine. They had been living in England for 15 years—most recently in a flat on the Thames in London—and were tiring of the rising costs and lack of sunshine. John, who has three grown children from a previous marriage, had had a career with Lloyd's of London followed by owning his own business. When the couple did their research and found a place where they'd be able to indulge her passion for sailing, his for golf, gave them both life on the water, had nonstop flights to England and had sunshine, they chose Palmetto. John sold his business and started a Florida-based business brokerage company. When he listed a steel business that was for sale in Palmetto they found it to be profitable and affordable so the couple purchased it and became hands-on owners—"starting from scratch," as Deb describes it.

How she and John met has its own quirky uniqueness as well. They were both in the Poconos—both skiing, but with different groups. He was there to raise money for a British ski team of disabled athletes. She was there with a learn-to-ski group. They met and had a commuter, trans-Atlantic relationship for years, meeting in various places like Bermuda, New York or Chicago. Deb had worked a variety of jobs, one of which included the National Council on the Handicapped writing speeches. They eventually married and the couple lived life in Britain until the need to move on took hold. In England Deb skied with the British Ski Team, training in France and the U.S. to prepare for the Paralympics.

For Deb, running a steel manufacturing business was just another challenge, another test of how she would cope with the unknown and the seemingly difficult. Life started giving her challenges from the day she was born. Born with a birth defect, Deb wears a steel prosthesis, foot to hip, where her left leg normally would be. She unabashedly wears shorts and the metal "leg" seems like an afterthought, save the limp it gives her.

Growing up in Indiana, Deb credits her parents for not over protecting or ever expecting less of her. In many ways, they may have been even tougher. She climbed trees, rode a bike, roller-skated—things that got her parents criticized for at times. She came into her own version of that tough-

ness in junior high when she wanted to take shop to learn to read blueprints and study drafting. The principal flatly told her no and added, "girls take home economics." Deb then threatened to sue the school. Soon after, she was not only taking drafting, but she became shop foreman, er woman. Such skills have come in handy with her present company.

More of that forged toughness can be seen in another challenge that befell her while also in her teen years. In high school Deb became badly dehydrated playing in a volleyball game and was diagnosed with Type 1 or juvenile diabetes. "It was hell. I had dealt with my disability, but it was hard to control the diabetes," she recalls. Nonetheless, the disease didn't keep her from playing tennis and enjoying scuba—two things she still participates in. A tucked away insulin pump around her waist keeps her blood sugar in check. Deb went on to Indiana University, studied speech communication and theatre, then earned a masters in human relations and marketing.

Had she not been involved in a serious accident last year (hit by a car that spun out of control due to the driver having had a heart attack), Deb had plans to compete in the Paralympics in both sailing and skiing. She had been training with the Sarasota Sailing Squadron and the St. Petersburg Yacht Club.

Manor Steel builds, but not completely—meaning they supply the steel structure for buildings like banks, schools, prisons—and someone else comes in and puts in the walls, roofs, utilities. Her company bids on jobs from Palmetto to Fort Myers and Naples and everything in between. Some of her company's projects have included the Regions Bank on St. Armands Circle, Manatee Elementary School, a surgical center in Venice, various shopping centers and a jail in Punta Gorda. According to her web site, the company grew 300% 2005 to 2006 with sales at \$2.4 million. Her goal for 2007 is \$3 million.

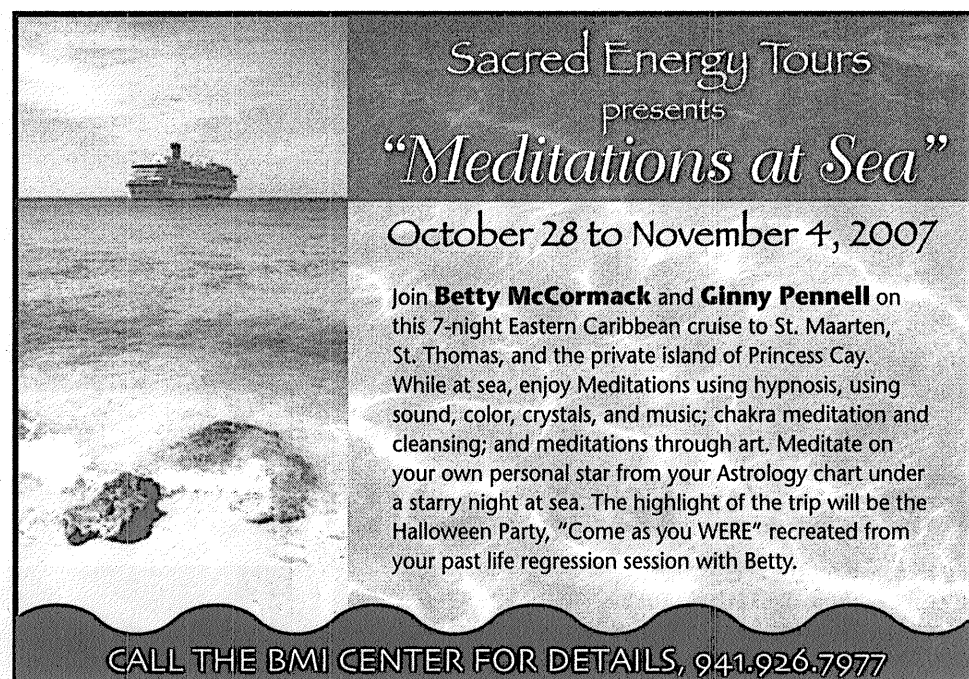
Jobs come in by way of drawings of the prospective building then Manor Steel bids on it. The steel comes from Tampa or Alabama, but has its roots in Poland and Russia and is sold to them by an entrepreneur in England. She has 15 employees—some out in the field. She shares with her all male staff—all of whom she and John hired—what she calls "a comfortable relationship. They're really good guys."

The steel leg has also made her a fighter. Fighters are often givers and this woman of steel has a soft place in her heart for others. She's just joined the board of the Boys and Girls Club in Palmetto and has volunteered in the past with Mote Marine and the Pelican Man. The couple takes gifts over the holidays to a children's shelter in Bradenton. One of her goals is to get more kids sailing via Aquarian Quest—a program that takes kids out on the water to teach them about marine life and ecology.

One story from Deb's past perhaps demonstrates her tenacity. While skiing in France with her husband one time she fell and broke her stump—the remaining bone that is left on her leg. She gave John part of her artificial leg, packed the remainder with snow, tied her legs together and skied down the remainder of the hill on one ski.

Okay, finally had to use a cliché because it fits so well: this is a woman with steely determination. ☺

Story: Louise Bruderle  
Photo: Evelyn England



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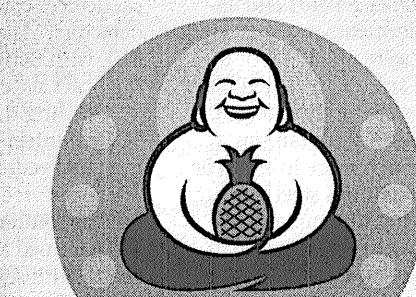
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