

Al and Dave Walker

Williston, Florida



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Learn about Florida Entrepreneur Al and Dave Walker:

Originally founded in 1978 by Robert E. Walker, Foss Foam Products of Florida, Inc. has developed an unmatched reputation for providing quality custom rudders and rudder replacements for boats manufactured in the United States and beyond. Over the past 40 years, three generations of the Walker family have worked hard to deliver a product that symbolizes quality craftsmanship and a passion for exceeding expectations. Robert “Al” Walker and David Walker, the son and grandson, respectively, of Robert E. Walker, and present-day owners of the business, shared the story behind the family business and offered a glimpse into a company that produces more sailboat rudders than anyone in the world.

“After serving in the Army during the Korean War, my father, Robert E.

Walker, got married to my mom, Maxine, and lived in Alabama, Arkansas and Chicago,” Al said. “In 1957, they moved to California where he found work at McDonnell Douglas Aircraft. After a few years, he went to work in pool construction before suffering a serious injury in a car accident. Because of his physical limitations, he had trouble finding a job right away. He ended up getting hired at Air Products Plastics Hose Plant, even though he failed his physical. They decided to keep him and ten years later he was running the company.”

Al continued, “Across the alley from Air Products was a company named The Foss Company. They manufactured sailboat rudders out of polyurethane foam. My father was fascinated with the product and process. After talking to the owner, he decided to move to Florida and open up a company doing the same thing. The California owner was a partner. Without a single customer or guarantee, he moved to Clearwater and opened up Foss Foam in Florida. This was in 1978 and the timing was perfect. The sailboat manufacturing business was booming. Manufacturers could not build boats fast enough. They were more than happy to have a supplier make their rudders better than they could and at a fair price.”

When he moved to Florida to start the business, Robert E. brought with him two experienced industry professionals from California to train the new staff. He also developed a unique sales approach – one that Al credits for helping the company succeed.

“He would take a section of rudder and a sledge hammer to various boat companies,” Al said. “He would then demonstrate how, even with the sledge hammer, he wasn’t able to break them. He’d convince them that

his rudders were less expensive and better made. That strategy worked and by 1984, the business was pretty well established and developed a good reputation.”

By 1987, Robert E.’s son, Al, came to work for the family business. As a scholarship athlete and a national champion who wrestled for The University of Alabama, Al brought with him experience and a unique skillset acquired after years of teaching, working for an oil distributor and running service stations. His first three years were a little challenging. Most every boat has a different rudder. That meant a different mold for every boat – which meant hundreds of molds and required the ability to identify and know them by sight. Still, the business continued to grow and expand. After learning the business, Al took over operations in 1994. Robert E. and Maxine retired and moved to Ocala that year.

The late 90s represented a time of innovation and a handful of projects that took Foss Foam Products of Florida outside of its standard wheelhouse. Al invented a floating dock system that was used in an everglades study. The company produced over a mile of floating dock walkways for that study. They also made running boards for a well-known van conversion company and fiberglass parts for Florida Power.

In 2000, Robert E. became ill and Al decided to move the business to Williston, FL, to be closer to his mom and dad. As he shared, the process of moving an entire company was not easy. However, they’ve since settled into their new home and enjoy operating out of Levy County.

“It’s hard enough to move a house, let alone an entire company,” Allen said. “We had tractor trailers and about 200 molds that weigh up to 300

libs. It was a daunting process that took us about a month. It was also expensive and required us to shut down production for a month. Also, the two hour drive north meant winter-time temperatures were a lot colder. Since you can't do production if temperatures are below 60 degrees, we had to adjust to that."

Allen continued, "Even through all that, however, we maintained our connections, built new ones in Levy County and business actually increased. Our move coincided with the first website for our business. A customer of ours, Richard Marker designed and built it and because of that new website, our business increased 10% the first year after our move."

One year later, in 2001, David Walker, Robert E.'s grandson, joined the company. He and his brother Ethan grew up helping in the shop. After going to college in San Francisco and working as an electrician, David decided to make it a career and is currently in the process of taking over Foss Foam.

"When my grandma passed away in 2001, I wanted to be part of the family business," David said. "My heart was no longer in being an electrician. Since joining the business, I've been running production and I'm slowly easing into ownership and management."

Over the years, Foss Foam has grown and contracted with the changes in the economy, but continues to make one of the best quality rudders in the world. Thanks to an emphasis on a conservative approach to doing business, they've dealt with recessions and even significant changes to their business model with relative ease. As Allen shared, these changes have shifted how and who they do business with.

“Starting around 2008, most of the boat manufacturing went overseas,” he said. “For most of our history, our business was a 50/50 mix of supplying manufacturers with OEM parts and doing replacement and custom rudders. Now it’s mostly replacements and custom work. Fortunately for us, the boats that are made in places like Europe and Asia have subpar rudders. Much of our work is replacing these rudders.”

David added, “We do a lot of business in the Northeast. We also ship rudders to Australia and New Zealand and even assist boaters with damaged rudders. If someone is stuck down in the islands, we can usually get them a replacement rudder made in less than two weeks.

Shipping takes about one week.”

Al and David each shared what they enjoy most about the business and how being part of a multi-generational family business has impacted their lives.

“I really enjoy making things,” Al said. “When I was a shop teacher in high school, I enjoyed making things with my hands. I also enjoy talking with customers. We deal with a lot of successful individuals and we get to know them on an individual level. It’s rewarding and interesting. The same can be said for our vendor relationships. We work with a lot of great people.”

David added, “I enjoy the interaction with our customers. Sailors and boaters are a great community of people. I also enjoy having my own business, where I’m afforded the opportunity to work hard and prove that hard work pays off. Lastly, I enjoy working with our employees and

running the shop. We have a great team and we're proud of what we build."

Looking ahead, David and Al are focused on finding skilled workers to allow them to continue the tradition of building high-quality custom rudders and making rapid repairs and replacements. They have a machine shop that allows them to do on-site machining and will look to possibly add some new ideas around that. Al, in particular, is looking forward to some much needed downtime while David ramps up his involvement as owner.

What advice do Allen and David have for aspiring entrepreneurs? "My advice is to first get all your ducks in a row," Al said. "Do everything you can while still gainfully employed. Start your new business on the side and gain a good reputation. You don't want to be starting from scratch when you leave your day job. Also, don't underestimate the financial obligations when starting a business. It's great to be the boss when the bills are paid and you have money in the bank. It's less fun when you're wondering how to pay bills or where your next orders are coming from."

David added, "Take things one step at a time. Always keep an eye on your finances and try not to over-extend yourself. Also, if you find good help, you need to take care of them. It's harder than you think to find good help – especially with blue collar type jobs. Dependability is everything with employees."

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