

'Emilio's Mom' revives prop guard debate

By Jim Flannery
Staff Writer

Marion Irving de Cruz is a mother on a mission. It is to ensure another mother doesn't lose a child in a boat propeller accident.

In the three years since her son Emilio, a University of California student, died of injuries from a houseboat propeller, she has almost single-handedly rekindled national debate over propeller guards. It is an issue boating safety gurus thought they had settled six years ago with a Coast Guard ruling that existing prop guard technology was not feasible for mass use.

Deaf to the chorus of naysayers who told her to forget about prop guards, Cruz persuaded the Coast Guard to schedule five hearings nationwide this spring on whether prop guards should be required on rental boats, rental houseboats in particular.

The deadline for mailing comments to the Coast Guard is Sept. 1.

On March 21, the third anniversary of Emilio Cruz's death, Cruz officially became a part of the boating safety establishment she is challenging. She received an appointment to a seat on the Boating Safety Advisory Council (BSAC), the nation's highest boating safety panel, though she has no boating experience.

"She's making this her life's fight to get this thing through, and I give her a lot of credit," says Shiri Koop of Klamath Falls, Ore., whose daughter died in a prop accident last summer.

Cruz, a single mother from Simi Valley, Calif., who calls herself "Emilio's Mom" on her business cards, is convinced putting prop guards on houseboats is feasible. She wants to require them on all rental houseboats after several fatal or disfiguring prop injuries caused by houseboats backing down on swimmers.

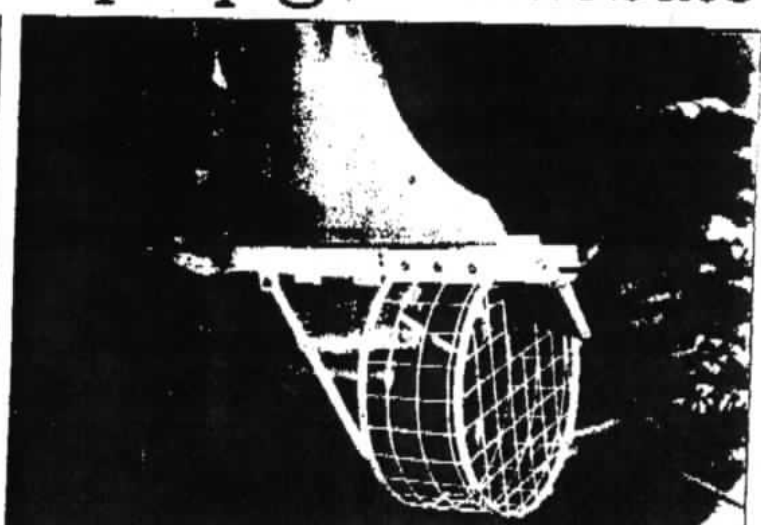
Among the victims: Cruz's son Emilio, 20, a third-year engineering student, who died at a fraternity party on Arizona's Lake Havasu. Three rental houseboats carrying 90 students were rafted together. Emilio Cruz had just jumped off the roof of the boat and into the water when the propeller — who had not been drinking — backed down on Cruz and the propeller sucked him in. It cut off his head and split him open from the groin to the abdomen. He bled to death.



Emilio Cruz died at age 20 of injuries from a houseboat propeller.

Other victims of propeller accidents include:

- Shirley Brocchini Jones, 24, married and the mother of a 7-month-old child, died July 29, 1995 of prop injuries in a houseboat accident on California's Lake Shasta. She had dismounted from a personal watercraft and was about to climb the houseboat's stern ladder when the driver threw the houseboat into reverse. The propellers severed her right leg at the hip and



Keith Jackson has designed this propeller guard for houseboats to prevent prop injuries should a boat accidentally back down on a swimmer.

Silveria, 27, of Santa Clara, Calif., who also lost a leg, a month later.

The Coast Guard's boating accident statistics show 30 propeller-related fatalities involving boats of all kinds in 1994. That was 3.8 percent of the 784 boating fatalities reported that year.

"Where the technology is feasible, it is criminal not to apply it," Cruz says. She has found at least two new prop guard designs, among them a stainless-steel-mesh cage guard — open for-

ward but closed aft to protect swimmers if a boat backs down on them — that appears to work on houseboats and other slower-moving craft. Its designer, Keith Jackson, of Redding, Calif., says it affects speed and maneuverability only marginally. Ultimately Cruz would like prop guards of some kind — or alternate power systems such as water jets — on all boats.

She says houseboats are a good starting point because those who rent them often are novice boaters who are nei-

ther educated nor experienced enough to be fully aware of the deadly propeller hazard. Owner of an office interior design company, Cruz has funded her campaign in part from an \$875,000 insurance settlement and has traveled extensively, seeking out advice and assistance from such advocacy groups as Safe Kids, Public Citizen and the Institute for Injury Reduction, a group of personal-injury attorneys.

She has won in some unlikely quarters grudging agreement that prop guards might work on the slower-moving houseboats, but old hands who have worked for years for safer boating grieve at the prospect of regulating a problem that, though gruesome in the injuries it causes, results in few fatalities compared to the deaths that could be prevented if boaters wore their life jackets.

The fatalities attributable to injuries from houseboat propellers numbered three from 1982 to 1995 and those due to injuries from rental boat propellers numbered 11 from 1989 to 1994. Those compare to 1994's 550 boat drowning deaths in which victims wore no life jackets.

Veteran boating safety advocates say their thinly spread resources should focus on the problems that cause the most deaths. They express frustration and reluctant admiration at Cruz's suc-

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— Bill Selden, chairman
Boating Safety Advisory Council

mangled the left leg. She died eight days later. Like Emilio Cruz, Brocchini Jones had been drinking. Nonetheless, her mother, Koop, who is championing Cruz's cause, says her daughter would be alive today had the houseboat been equipped with prop guards.

- Shasta County sheriff's deputies report at least five others injured by houseboat propellers on Lake Shasta from 1992 to 1995. Among them are Stacey Epping, 22, of Portland, Ore., who lost a leg in May 1992 and Gilbert

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Silverton seeks its oldest boat

Silverton Marine Corp., the Millville, N.J., powerboat builder, is looking for the oldest Silverton still in service.

The company, in its 27th year, will accept entries

'The biggest problem is in PFDs ...'

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cess in goading the Coast Guard to air her cause.

Cruz wrote a five-page letter asking the Coast Guard to look at prop guards again, but after receiving several "boiler plate" responses she met with her U.S. representatives — Rep. Elton Gallegly, a Republican, and Sen. Diane Feinstein, a Democrat — to seek help. Those contacts led to meetings with Transportation Secretary Federico Pena's deputy chief of staff — Cruz says the deputy asked Guard Commandant Robert E. Kramek for a report on prop injuries — and to her BSAC appointment.

The Coast Guard over the past year has issued three Federal Register notices calling for information on the houseboat and rental-boat market and related propeller injuries. The first two requests drew almost 2,000 responses, though most were form letters supporting prop guards. A series of hearings this spring, though only lightly attended by the public, drew testimony from families of victims, prop guard makers and industry spokesmen. Some regard the hearings as an unfortunate response to Cruz's emotional pleas in an arena where injury and fatality statistics — "body counts," as Cruz calls them — usually hold sway.

"Where is the biggest problem?" asks BSAC chairman Bill Selden, of Richmond, Va. "The problem is in PFDs [personal flotation devices] ... [Cruz] has made it a personal vendetta to put prop guards on every rental houseboat. There have been two [houseboat prop] deaths,

but those are the only two deaths in the past 10 years. We can't regulate every situation with every death. Otherwise we would be regulating everybody off the water."

Richard Snyder, Mercury Marine's principal engineer for product evaluation and one of the authors of BSAC's 1989 study, agrees that the numbers fail to support Cruz's call for regulation. "People are just crumbling before her verbal barrage of 'What are you going to do about my son's death?'" Snyder says.

He says neither the technology nor the incidence of prop guard injuries has changed since that study, which concluded that there was no prop guard that could be applied safely to the universe of boats. It also found that existing guards affect performance and steering at higher speeds, and because most cage-type guards enlarge the striking surface around props 30 to 50 percent, it increases likelihood of blunt trauma at speeds over 7 to 8 mph.

At higher speeds, the prop guards themselves "rip flesh off. They don't just leave slices that can be sewn up," Snyder says. Yet he acknowledges that in specific situations — where boat speeds are subplaning and the waters are not shoal or full of weeds — a prop guard could work safely and well on a houseboat.

Comments may be mailed to the Executive Secretary, Marine Safety Council (G-LRA/3406) (CGD95-041) U.S. Coast Guard Headquarters, 2100 Second Street SW, Washington, D.C. 20583-0001. ■