



SUSANA BATES

SAFE HARBOR Cloud Nine, part of Sheila Schwartz's Lots of Yachts fleet, docked at World's Fair Marina in Queens.

Sunk by horrors of 9/11, party planner sails again

In early September 2001, Sheila Schwartz sailed a new yacht from Erie, Pa., through the state canal system and down the Hudson toward the gleaming towers of New York Harbor.

The yacht was one of many used by her company, Lots of Yachts/Ambassador Events, which specializes in charters and land-based sites for parties.

If you wanted to have a prom, a corporate retreat, a bust-out wedding or anniversary, bar mitzvah, christening or birthday blast, you called Schwartz and this party princess supplied a yacht, SoHo loft, Central Park West penthouse, Rockefeller Center townhouse, uptown museum or Palm Beach hotel banquet room. She had it catered and staffed from soup to sweeper.

The yachts could accommodate from six to 500 people, her land parties from 20 to 1,500. She also did location work for Hollywood movies and TV shows such as "Law and Order."

Business was booming back then, back before Sept. 11, 2001, before the world changed forever.

"It took about a week to sail that yacht down, and we got into New York City on Sept. 10 at 10 p.m.," she says. "When we sailed past the World Trade Center, I said to the crew, 'This is the most powerful place on Earth.'"

Schwartz would know. This New Yorker has been around the world more than a few times, kicking the tires in some of the hottest spots under the sun. After graduating with a master's in social work from NYU and a second master's in public administration from Harvard's John F. Kennedy School of Government, in the 1980s, Schwartz worked with refugee agencies in Somalia, Liberia, Sierra Leone, Armenia, Vietnam, Cambodia, Laos and other countries.

"By Sept. 10, 2001, I'd seen some of the most horrible situations imaginable in

those Third World nations," she says. "Nothing prepared me for what would happen the next morning."

After leaving the yacht that night, Schwartz went home to her 27th-floor apartment in the Zeckendorf Towers on E. 14th St., with a clear downtown view of the dazzling Manhattan skyline.

"In the morning, I watched in horror as the planes slammed into the towers," she says. "I thought of all my clients in those buildings. Many dear friends. I'd worked closely with the banquet department of Windows on the World. I'd done Christmas parties for so many firms there. I'd run luxury shuttles from the North Cove Marina at the base of the towers to the U.S. Open on Sept. 8. I was planning several Christmas parties. . . ."

That morning, Schwartz watched the buildings crumble and knew she'd lost hundreds of friends. "I'd been a strong person in other disasters," she says. "Coups in Liberia and Sierra Leone, war without electricity in Armenia. I was there when 10,000 children died in Somalia in a single week."

A life destroyed

But this was different. Schwartz says she always knew that no matter how bad it was in other places, she could always go home. Back to New York. Where it was safe. Back to civilization.

"But now, watching this happen to friends, clients, fellow New Yorkers, I didn't sleep for months," she says. "A permanent image of the planes slamming in-

to the buildings seared into my mind. The harbor was closed. The marina was gone. So was my business, which was a small loss compared to the loss of others. There was nothing to celebrate here. Only sadness. All the yachts left New York. And so did I."

Schwartz headed south, to Florida, and slowly rebuilt her business. Many of the corporations she'd served in New York threw their parties in places like Key West, West Palm Beach and Miami.

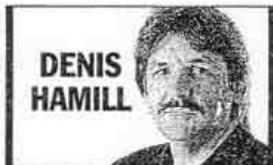
"But now, this summer, I've returned," she says. "People find us in the Manhattan phone book or online. Lots of Yachts/Ambassador Events is again doing

proms and graduations, weddings and corporate parties. In the past two months, I've been contacted at our Web site . . . by the wives or fiancées of five different servicemen who went to Iraq who want to have coming home parties for them."

Schwartz says the economy is weaker but New Yorkers are kinder and gentler and nicer.

"We're not doing the same upscale parties," she says. "Not \$40 bottles of wine, but people are really in the mood to celebrate and to start living again. Three years ago, dinner, drinks and four hours on a yacht like The Cloud 9 II was \$125 a head. Now, with some modifications, it's like \$85. And New York Harbor is now the safest place on Earth, with all the Coast Guard and police patrols. I'm still dealing with my own trauma. But our best payback to the monsters who attacked New York is to rebuild the city 10 times more beautiful. And that includes, too, having fun and going to great parties."

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