

WEEKEND LIFE

PEOPLE

Stories by Suzanne Bourret

Local treasures

Honouring those who make our community unique



John Rennison, The Spectator

DR. JEFFREY ENNIS: Psychiatrist, chronic pain specialist, boat builder

Name: Dr. Jeffrey Ennis, 46

Who: Psychiatrist and boat builder

What: Boat building has been the passion of Dr. Jeffrey Ennis since he built his first boat at the age of 22. He wanted a sailboat, but when he drove by a store window and saw a wooden boat, he knew he had to have it.

It came in a kit and he had never built a boat before, but he didn't let it faze him. He just went home and started to build it. The boat is long gone now, but building it became a meaningful exercise in the years to come for Ennis.

He has had 12 surgeries in 30 years, the result of having Ehlers-Danlos syndrome, a disorder of the elastic connective tissue. Then in 1989, he got Guillain-Barré, a neurological disorder of the peripheral nerves.

"They're not connected, it was just bad luck," says Ennis, who is a psychiatrist at St. Joseph's Community Health Centre and operates a chronic pain clinic at St. Joseph's Hospital, as well as being a consultant at Chedoke Health Centre Inc.

He is in pain most of the time, but he hasn't let it stop him from building boats.

"I can't do things the way I used to, so I have had to find other ways."

Six years ago when he was looking at boats and unwell, he decided he had to find a boat he could build. That led to research and a lot of problem-solving.

Last April, he instructed a boat-building class in rented space in a Dundas factory. Five were built, including a canoe Ennis re-designed to make its construction less painful

for him. He called the ultra-light canoe, The Dundas.

"It was dramatically simplified. The actual performance and the way it handles on the water is better than the original design."

He says the re-design is all about problem-solving, which is what chronic pain is all about. With his sons, 15 and 13, he plans to film the building of another Dundas canoe that will be combined with a how-to book.

The cedar strip canoe he hopes to build next year will be another exercise in problem solving and building it better.

"With pain, you have to problem-solve. It's a set of cards that you have to play well."

Quote: "If you get stuck looking backward, you'll never look forward and find out what you can do."