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News

Newsmaker 2008: J. Hilary Rockett Jr.

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A man who has a history with Brunswick

BRUNSWICK — Although he lives in Marblehead, Mass., much of J. Hilary Rockett Jr.'s life can be traced to Brunswick, where his \$25 million Maine Street Station development rises from a former brownfield site a little more each day.

A 1986 Bowdoin College graduate, Rockett, 45, met his wife, Paige, his first week at the school — the couple now raises three children in Marblehead. Best friend Mike Lyne, project manager of Maine Street Station, graduated from Bowdoin with Rockett. And it was Bowdoin that drew Rockett back to Brunswick to build the sometimes controversial multi-use development on Maine Street.

Rockett was initially lured to Bowdoin, he said, by longtime hockey coach Sidney Watson.

"Bowdoin was the only place I wanted to go, once I met Sid," said Rockett, who attended Watson's hockey camp in 7th and 8th grade. Rockett was the captain of the 1985 Bowdoin College championship hockey team before graduating in 1986.

While at Bowdoin, Rockett also was a member of the Beta Theta Pi fraternity.

Newsmakers 2008: An eight-part series in which The Times Record looks back at major issues and developments of 2008 through the eyes of people involved with the year's top stories..

As Brunswick landmarks Grand City and the Captain Daniel Stone Inn shutter their windows, another part of town is seeing signs of life as developer **J. Hilary Rockett Jr.**'s \$25 million Maine Street Station project takes shape. Despite the worrisome national and local economy, the Bowdoin College graduate remains enthusiastic about the multi-modal development.

Newsmakers of 2008

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"But I was a good Beta," he said.
"No stories."

Well, maybe one: Their first week at Bowdoin, Lyne and Rockett were walking near campus, when Rockett saw his future wife, Paige.

"I said a few things," Rockett admitted, "and one of them was, 'I'm going to marry her.'"

Rockett grew up in Marblehead, where he still lives with his family — wife, Paige, daughter Mary, 16, and sons Tucker, 15, and 8-year-old Sam, who Rockett describes as "100 percent boy."

Daughter Mary is away at school this year in western Massachusetts. Son Tucker, Rockett said, is an avid Red Sox fan — the two attend at least 10 games each year. He wants to be a sports writer.

Rockett spends the bulk of his time with his kids. Tucker has undergone frequent surgeries for cerebral palsy, a neurological disorder that affects muscle movement. Tucker spent three months at Spaulding Rehabilitation Hospital in Boston this year.

"He was in so much pain," Rockett said.

Rockett said the biggest lesson he's learned about parenting is that "you have to be an advocate for your children. Keep the nurses and the people at the front desk happy and they will call you back."

Rockett spoke proudly of "Tucker's Tourney," a Wiffle-ball tournament organized by three of his son's friends in August that raised more than \$11,000 for research at Spaulding.

Tucker was home in time for Thanksgiving, and his proud father said he's confident that Tucker "will be fine."

For six or seven years, Rockett ran the North Shore Center for Conductive Education, a school he founded and that Tucker attended, in addition to his development work. Then, in 2000 — 10 days after Sam was born — he was diagnosed with brain cancer.

"It changes your life," he said.

He was given a dire prognosis, but got a second opinion from a doctor to whom Rockett's brother had sold his house.

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"He had written a paper on astroblastoma," the type of cancer Rockett was diagnosed with. "It's so important to get a second opinion," Rockett said.

Rockett was treated at New England Medical Center in Boston. Today he's fine. But the experience resulted in something of an epiphany for the businessman: "I want to be involved with projects I'm really passionate about," he said. "I want to be able to make work fun."

Part of that fun is working in a community he knows and loves, and where he has a history.

Similar to Marblehead in population, Brunswick also boasts a waterfront with working fishermen, Rockett said. Plus, there's Bowdoin.

"I've said this four or five times," he said. "If this was Lewiston, with Bates, or Waterville, with Colby, I wouldn't have done it."

He also says he wouldn't have taken on the project without Lyne on board.

"I said, I want to hire somebody I like, who's smart, and who I trust as much as anybody," Rockett said. "I wouldn't have done it if Mike hadn't done it."

"I was telling my wife last night ... Mike and I, in 1986, were in the gym talking about what we were going to do (after graduation)," Rockett said. "We said, 'We should work together.' The first call I made when I found out I was going to do this project was to Mike."

At the time, Lyne was working for the Anchorage (Alaska) Fire Department, after working for three years as a fire jumper for the Alaska Fire Service. After initial conversations, it took about a year for the joint development agreement to be finalized, Lyne said, "and then, yes, I did sign up immediately."

Maine Street Station, Rockett said, will be a "somewhere I want to shop, to live, to work."

Yes, a development like he plans is riskier than, say, a mall like Cook's Corner, but Rockett is hoping for a development representative of Brunswick itself.

"When you go to Vermont, you want to buy Vermont maple syrup" because it's a part of the experience, Rockett said. "That's what this wants to be."

Of the controversy that surrounded the project, largely centering on a Joint Development Agreement between the town and Rockett's JHR Development, Rockett said he only gets frustrated "when people question my motivation and integrity. That bothers me still."

But the project moves ahead, and previous critics have praised Rockett publicly for compromises he made. Among them, a scaled-down inn on the site of what is currently the People Plus center. A new site for the program is being negotiated by the town, and Rockett said the "lean, mean and green inn," and the project's it's part of, will be a great connector between the college and the downtown.

And because Maine Street Station is "a good project," Rockett said, the national — and local — economic downturn shouldn't have in impact, particularly with Bowdoin College signed on to lease space in the development.

While Rockett wouldn't confirm specific tenants, other than Bowdoin, before the first of the year, he said tenants are beginning to line up to move into the new development.

"Teetering projects are going under," Rockett said. "Through good times and bad times, good projects work."



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