

Herb Chambers' sixth Excellence, an 80m by Abeking & Rasmussen, began as a Winch Design concept



ON BOARD WITH

Herb Chambers



The things he fell in love with as a boy are still his passions today, the owner of Excellence tells Cecile Gauert: one he built his business around, the other made a big splash last year

● Super Bowl 2020 was a special weekend in Miami. Beneath the glass towers glittering in the sun was an equally glittering line-up of the biggest and best superyachts launched in 2019. There was the 93-metre Feadship Lady S, Oceanco's 109-metre Bravo Eugenia and 90-metre DreAMBoat, while Germany was represented in the shape of Lürssen's 95-metre Madsummer. However there was one notable exception to this stellar procession – easily the most eye-catching superyacht launched last year: 80-metre Excellence.

"I am not into sports," explains Herb Chambers, her owner, as we chat in his office

near Boston a few days before the big hoopla in Miami. What he loves are cars, boats and, many years after making it big in the business world, work. "It's something I enjoy," he says. "People ask, 'Why do you work so much?' and I reply, 'I really don't work, I do what I love to do.'"

That's why we meet in a cloudy Boston in January rather than, say, St Barths, one of his favourite Caribbean destinations. Chambers, who has established one of the largest car dealership franchises in the US, keeps a regular work schedule. He doesn't sell cars – never has – but he likes to stay involved with the day-to-day management of the company.



The Herb Chambers Companies owns about 60 dealerships employing around 2,500 people within a 160-kilometre radius of Boston and represents practically every brand. The local newspaper says his company sells more cars than any other in New England.

Chambers' office is on the second floor of a Mercedes-Benz dealership in Somerville, a neighbourhood of Boston. The top floor is a helipad, which allows him to shave hours off the commute from his weekend residence in Connecticut. Near the reception desk is a large framed picture of his new Excellence with the signature of the craftsmen involved in her construction at Abeking & Rasmussen; a stack of magazines is on the table, including the December issue of BOAT International with Excellence on the cover, and the latest Boston magazine, which belongs to a friend. Awards that his company has won, including one for being one of the area's top employers, catch the light from a spotlight shining on a nearby cabinet.

Downstairs, aside from the squeaky-clean showroom filled with the latest Mercedes cars, is the service centre. The polished floor has hardly a tyre mark and the space smells like freshly brewed coffee. Good service is at the heart of what his company does. "We don't want to sell people anything," he says. "We want to help them buy things that they want and hopefully they will love us for that."

He got into the car business in 1985, buying an Oldsmobile-Cadillac dealership where he had received poor service. He knew he could do better and so he did.



Chambers served as an aviation electrician in the US Navy before launching A-Copy America, a photocopier distribution business

But his first fortune wasn't made in cars – it was in photocopiers. In the early 1960s, Chambers was fresh out of the US Navy, where he had been an aviation electrician, and looking for a job when he saw an ad in *The Boston Globe* seeking a photocopier repairman. Fixing things sounded like something he might want to do, although he wasn't quite sure what the job entailed. "No one knew what photocopying was back then. I thought a copy machine was something to copy photos," he says with a laugh.

He talked himself into the job – a gift he had picked up in his youth. "I grew up in a very blue-collar neighbourhood. My father was a commercial artist and we lived with my grandmother, so we never had a lot of money," he says. "I always had a job from the time I was 13 years old." One of his first was at a Stop & Shop supermarket where he was hired after lying about his age. He liked working much more than school. "The only thing I enjoyed about school was mathematics," he says.

During his stint as a copier repairman, he learned pretty quickly that people selling copiers were

"I was a pretty good salesman; I [still] am a pretty good salesman, but only because I heard the word 'no' so many times"



Herb Chambers Companies now has 60 dealerships, including this Lexus showroom, in Sharon, near Boston





“I was in awe of that boat [an acquaintance’s Feadship]. I did not know where to sit and I did not want to touch anything. The owner said to me, ‘One day you will have one of these’”

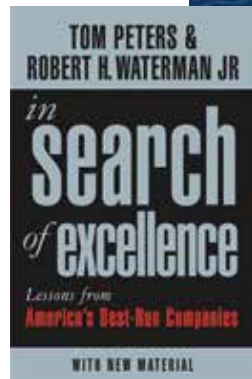
making much more money, and he parlayed himself into a sales job.

“I was a pretty good salesman; I am a pretty good salesman today,” he says with a smile, “but only because I heard the word ‘no’ so many times in my life.” He was also at a disadvantage because he was shy. “I was afraid to talk to people,” he says, “[but] I knew I could work harder than most salespeople and I outworked them.”

Around the time the kid from Dorchester, Boston, started his first company, at the age of 22, he enrolled in a 12-week training course at Dale Carnegie to overcome his shyness. “It was one of the best things I’ve ever done.”

The photocopier business was changing, and he saw the opportunity. “Copy machines were just becoming popular and I was in the right place, certainly at the right time, and I built the company to be the largest photocopier distributor in America.”

After a few years he was finally in a position to indulge his long fascination with cars and boats, which he had loved from an early age. He remembers going to a boat show in Boston with his father in the early 1950s, when he was 10 or 11 years old, and becoming enthralled with a futuristic-looking motorboat built by the Outboard Marine Corporation. “Why don’t we buy one of these?” he asked his father, who gave a response typical of parents seeking to appease a child: “We’ll look at it next year.” Meanwhile, when he fell for a curvaceous Cadillac convertible he’d seen for sale down the street and asked why they did not replace their old Buick with it, he got the same answer from his mother. “Then I got a job at 13 years old, and I realised what money was,” he says, but the experience didn’t dim



his desire to own these beautiful, shiny machines.

Summer times, which he spent at his grandmother’s cottage south of Boston, gave him a chance to get on the water. He had a friend with a small motorboat and they went exploring in it. A few years after founding his company A-Copy America, he bought his first boat, a used nine-metre flybridge motor yacht built by Trojan. “I paid \$10,000 [\$7,720] for it; I remember it very clearly,” he says. “It was all the money I had.”

“My company continued to do well, so I got a bigger boat, and a bigger boat, and a bigger boat, and in between all those boats, I probably owned a half dozen Cigarette boats, two or three Magnums and a Formula boat. I’ve always had this passion for boats. I love them,” says

Chambers, whose current fleet comprises his 80-metre Abeking & Rasmussen *Excellence*, a Mangusta 94 and a 47-metre Feadship (formerly known as *Detroit Eagle* and *Sea Racer*). He remembers the progression from the Trojan to a 12-metre Chris-Craft, a 14-metre Concorde and then a 16-metre Hatteras.

His first experience with a superyacht was on board an acquaintance’s Feadship docked near his boat in Connecticut. “I was in awe of that boat,” he says. When the owner, a car salesman and former politician, invited him on board he remembers being intimidated. “I was so nervous, I did not know where to sit, I did not want to touch anything and he said to me, ‘One day you will have one of these,’ and I said, ‘I know I will never have one of these.’”

His first big yacht, built in 1979, was a 25-metre custom-built Broward with a modern interior



Excellence V, the 60m Abeking & Rasmussen, was designed by Raymond Langton. Opposite page, bottom: the book that inspired her name



and two turbocharged GM diesel engines. He named it *A-Copy*, after his company. “To me, at the time, it was like a baby Feadship,” he says. “It was a great boat. I chartered it and it was pretty popular.” Then came the windfall from the sale of his business in 1983, and just three years later his friend’s prediction came true as Chambers took delivery of his first Feadship, a 40 metre, the first *Excellence*.

The name of the yacht was inspired by a bestselling book by Tom Peters and Robert Waterman that he was reading at the time, *In Search of Excellence*. He made the boat available for charter, as he has all the following ones – *Excellence II* (another Feadship), *Excellence III* (his first Abeking) and V (he built but never owned *Excellence IV*, as it was bought mid-construction by another owner who liked it). The newest *Excellence* (“I stopped numbering the boats because it was getting kind of silly”) is on the charter market as well.

The name *Excellence* comes with certain responsibilities, he admits. “We tell people when they come to work on her, ‘She is not called *Average*.’ Just the name of the boat puts a lot of pressure on you. The boat needs to be excellent all the time.”

He buys and builds boats for pleasure, and

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QUICKFIRE
Herb Chambers

CHAUFFEUR OR CHEF?
A chef

IDEA OF LUXURY?
Luxury is space

HOW MANY WATCHES?
Way too many. I truly love them, but I wear an Apple Watch because it does so many things

a fascinating thing for me to go out on that boat

SPEED OR STYLE?
That’s a tough one. Let’s say style. I like the styling of cars and yachts but if they did not go fast, I would not like them. So I’d say speed and style – but style first

FAVOURITE BEACH?
St Barths



FIRST BOATING MEMORY?
Down where my grandmother had a cottage, a friend of mine owned a Lyman lapstrake motorboat, and his father – he came from a pretty wealthy family – had a 15-metre Chris-Craft motor yacht. It was

FAVOURITE CAR?
I love cars and I once had as many as 20 to 25 of them, but now I probably have about a dozen. My favourite is a 1973 Ferrari Daytona Spider

FIRST THINGS YOU PACK?
My passport and iPhone





he keeps an eye on the market by reading all the boat magazines, but it is also a business. "Chartering is important to me because the boats are so expensive to run and everything in my world has a price/value relationship. I really like the value of having the yacht, but I don't like what it costs to do it, and by chartering, I can reduce that price. Could I have the boat, use it and not charter it? Yes I could, but to me the value would not be there," he says.



Chambers has said previously that when he first saw Winch Design's original rendering of what is now Excellence, "I fell in love"

The new *Excellence*, designed inside and out by Winch Design, is a big departure from all of his previous yachts and is in no way average. The yacht's topsides are almost entirely glass and its elongated hull ends in a thin reverse bow. He loved his previous boat, the 60-metre *Abeking Excellence V*, which had more classic lines, but he had warmed to the idea of a different approach when he saw a concept by the award-winning British designer. "I kept thinking about how I could have bigger windows, more glass. And when I saw Andrew Winch's rendering, I thought that could be the answer, but with some modification to it." He also wanted a yacht that

would not look like any other, and on a recent visit to St Barths he was pleased to spot *Excellence* from a significant distance.

He is happy with the response he's received so far and the yacht, which is under the command of Captain Ray Shore (Chambers' captain for more than 30 years), has already chartered well. He knows why. "There is no greater luxury than being on a yacht where you get personalised service and you don't have to wait for anything," he says. "When you have a yacht with a crew, you can pretty much have whatever it is you want 24 hours a day, seven days a week."

They say the harder you work, the luckier you get and this is true of Chambers. He looks back on his success with the humility of a man who has had to earn every cent. "I'm basically just a hard-working guy who has been very fortunate to be in the right place at the right time." ■



Large windows were an important feature of Chambers' design wish list

"Everything in my world has a price/value relationship. I like the value of having the yacht, but I don't like what it costs to do it"