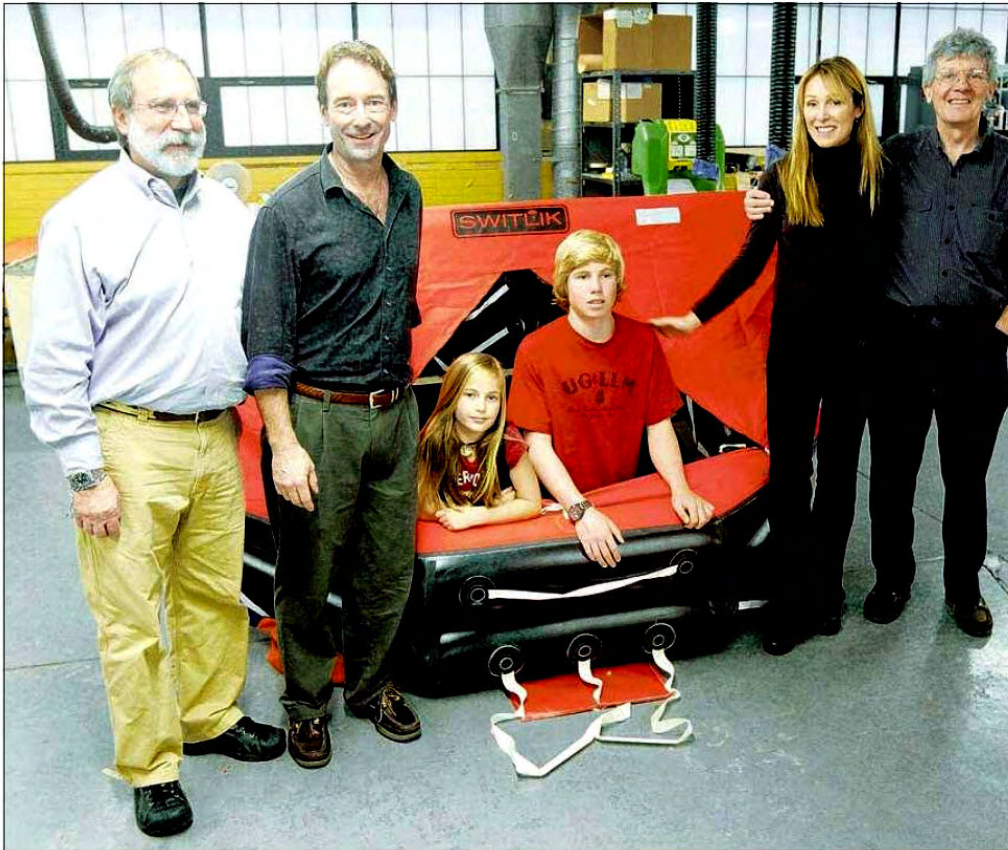


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RAFT SAVED THEIR LIVES



PHOTOS BY MARTIN GRIFF/THE TIMES

Top photo, Stan Switlik of Switlik Parachute Co., John, Camille, Jack and Jean Silverwood, and Richard Switlik Jr. with a model of the raft that saved the family. Bottom left; Silverwood shows the prosthesis he wears on his left leg; and at right, he and his wife describe their ordeal at sea.

Family thanks workers

Family thanks workers

By Alex Zdan
STAFF WRITER

HAMILTON - The Emerald Jane was being torn to shreds. The 55-foot catamaran had been impaled by a hidden coral reef hundreds of miles from the nearest port, violently slamming back and forth in the surf as the coral ripped the ship's fiberglass body apart. For John and Jean Silverwood, an adventure at sea with their four children had instantly turned into a nightmare.

As the family frantically activated their emergency beacon, John and 14-year-old Ben, the eldest child, tried to secure the sails. The movement of the boat's broken spine tore the 80-foot, 2,500-pound main mast from the deck. It fell across John's legs before he heard any sound, shearing off his left leg at the knee.

Amid the chaos and horror of that night in the South Pacific, everyone knew they had to get to safety. But their life raft was caught between the two bows, periodically crushed, and then released by the waves which moved the boat at will.

After 7 hours, Jean was able to free the raft. Making several trips in the small craft, Ben and his mother got everyone off the boat and onto a nearby ledge before the Emerald Jane disintegrated.

For the workers of Switlik Parachute Co. in Hamilton, the family's story is not just a tale of strength and survival. Six years later, the Silverwoods are living proof the products made at the East State Street factory work, and the family visited the workers there yesterday to tell them so.

"If it weren't for the quality of construction of what you do here, I literally would not be alive," John Silverwood said to dozens of employees gathered on the factory floor.

"We had maybe 10 different things we had on board that we thought would save our lives," Jean Silverwood said, "but yours was the only one that really worked when the time came, so we're grateful for that."

The meeting was an emotional one for some Switlik employees. Quality inspector Ann Sweeny tearfully expressed her joy the family had survived.

"I'm really glad that you all made it," she said as she embraced John Silverwood.

The workers learned about the Silverwoods' tale in 2008 when Richard Switlik Jr. read "Black Wave," the book both parents co-authored about, the family's experience.

"I first read it coming back on a flight and I literally had tears in my eyes," Switlik said.

Since then, Switlik said he's become friends with the Silverwoods, going to trade shows together promoting the company.

"It's just a very moving experience, and they're a remarkable family," he said. Switlik's employees agreed.

"It gives you chills when you hear a story like that,"

supervisor Maria Demetrio said.

Demetrio, who has been employed by Switlik 10 years and is part of the team that constructs the MD-2 rafts, said it's encouraging to hear about people saved by the products she helped make.

"So that means it's working," she said.

While planning their voyage, the Silverwoods had initially chosen a French-made raft sold by Vane Brothers of Baltimore. But Jean Silverwood had a sudden hunch the product wasn't the best available.

"I just out of the blue said, 'John you've got to get it tested,'" Jean Silverwood said.

John did, and saw a severely underwhelming demonstration where it repeatedly failed to inflate automatically.

"I've got 4 kids, ages 3 to 14. What do you recommend?" John Silverwood said. "They said, 'MD-2, because of Switlik's reputation.'"

Now, the Silverwoods have a reputation of their own at Switlik.

"I've been autographing books as I go up and down the line," John Silverwood said.

It's the family's first visit to the plant.

"We're so excited," Jean Silverwood said. "I had no idea it was that big of an operation."

"I love the idea that it's a family operation," she added.

Though their original life raft is now a plaything for the 14 children of the Polynesian family who rescued them from the reef, another MD-2 was set up inside the factory. John Silverwood said he and his family have had a handful of reunions with the craft over the past 6 years, and "at a couple of boat shows, but to see it and to meet the people who made it, this is huge," he said.

Workers marveled at the story the Silverwoods had to tell.

"This is just overwhelming," said Dolores Phelps, who has worked at Switlik for 41 years. "And over the years, we've seen us progress in a nice positive way," she said. "I love working here at Switlik."

Stanley Switlik, Richard's brother who oversees operations, said hearing the survivors' stories puts their work in a larger context.

"This is particularly nice for the employees," he said. "This is where they get an opportunity to meet them. This is real."

It's also an even greater motivation to get things right, he said.

"You try and tell people it only has to work once," he said. "But it has to work once."