

## It's All About the Process

After plunging into kayaking, Ken Stelter now is helping show others the way to go.

**KEN STELTER HAS AN AFFINITY** for figuring out how things work, and then improving them. A native of northern Illinois, Stelter began his career in the 1970s as an electronics technician with industrial control system provider Modcomp. After five years at the company's Florida headquarters, he returned to the Midwest in field service with clients including both National Steel and U.S. Steel. He began taking some college classes in programming, and soon National Steel offered him a position at its 1950s-vintage Midwest Plant in Portage, Ind.

The plant was well into the process of upgrading to Modcomp mini-computer-based controls, so in hiring Stelter, they were bringing an expert in-house. "They knew me and were willing to take me on as a programmer in the process control department," Stelter said. "It was a natural fit."

Today he is a process engineer at the Midwest plant, now owned by U.S. Steel, and much of that same control equipment is still in service. Although Stelter spends some time on troubleshooting and repair, as much or more is spent on "continuous improvement, trying to make what we do a little better, a little more efficient, a little easier for the operator."

Along the way, Stelter reconnected with his Midwestern roots and established his own family. And that's when the fun began.

"On a camping trip about seven years ago my daughter and I rented these little plastic sit-on-tops. It was just on a lark, but I really enjoyed it." Soon he decided to try his hand at building a kayak of his own and ordered a stitch-and-glue kit for a 17-ft sea kayak. "Building it was about a six-week project," Stelter said. "Then I just brought it to the local lake, threw it in, and started paddling."

Next he decided to try a cedar strip kayak. "The entire boat is built up of 3/4-in. strips of western red cedar all glued together over a form and the whole thing is covered with fiberglass. It took about three years, but I enjoyed the process of building it as much as anything."

Then in 2008 Stelter saw a flyer for an upcoming race in Michigan City and decided to investigate. "The guy who was organizing the



▲ Stelter on a brief maiden voyage in his cedar strip kayak, one day before the start of the Burnham Marquette Water Trail Expedition in June 2009.

race said he also was starting a club. I said, 'Count me in!'"

That organization, the Northwest Indiana Paddling Association, now has more than 300 members. In addition to paddling together, members go into creeks and clear out tree falls, opening them up to be available for paddlers.

The group also is a founding member of the Lake Michigan Water Trail Association, which is working to develop safe public access around the lake to complement the existing Lake Michigan Circle Tour for cars. Covering 1,100 miles, the water trail will link access sites around the shoreline, and create signage for well-defined, safe public access.

The project got a boost from the two-day Burnham Marquette Water Trail Expedition in June 2009. Stelter and other kayakers paddled along the shoreline from Chicago's 12th Street Beach to Michigan City, Ind.

"We had 30 people kayaking at times," Stelter said. The group made scheduled stops about every six miles and often was greeted by local officials. "We had press coverage from almost every newspaper in the region, and some great things happened." For example, some lakefront towns that previously had been off limits to paddlers have become kayak-friendly. "Long Beach, near Michigan City, is now creating a public access point geared specifically toward kayakers."

Another example is at Indiana Dunes State Park. "The park has about five miles of beautiful, sandy beaches and dunes," Stelter said, "but the area was off limits to landing boats of any kind, including kayaks and canoes." That changed after the 2009 expedition. Today the beach has a special landing zone for kayakers.

The first segment of the water trail, which goes from downtown Chicago and to New Buffalo, Mich., is complete and recognition from the National Park Service's Rivers, Trails, and Conservation Program is expected soon. A June 4 celebration is scheduled to highlight the NPS recognition. For more information visit [www.lmwat.org](http://www.lmwat.org). To learn more about the Northwest Indiana Paddling Association, visit [www.nwipa.org](http://www.nwipa.org). And of course you can contact Stelter through both websites, for which he serves as webmaster. **MSC**



◀ Stelter applying the fiberglass to the deck of his cedar strip kayak. To see more photos, visit [www.modernsteel.com/photos](http://www.modernsteel.com/photos).