

Heart of Sailing

George Saidah runs a program that offers an opportunity for special needs children to go sailing, and it's coming to Surf City. As the owner of a computer software company, he's managed to get together enough money to entirely fund and devote all his free time to the program he calls "Heart of Sailing."

Saidah travels across the United States with sailboats in tow to offer days of sailing to kids who are developmentally disabled. He will bring Heart of Sailing to the Surf City Yacht Club Sept. 16-19, and is currently looking for people who are able to donate their time and their sailboats for a day or more. The boats need not be specially equipped.

"I'm not a sales-type person and I can't convince anyone that this works," he said of his efforts, but he has found the program has the ability to profoundly affect all who participate, both children and their caregivers.

"This" is what Saidah calls an "overwhelming transformation" that seems to take place in the children who are sailing as well as in their parents or caregivers who go along for the trip.

"What we do is simple. We have no staff to take care of the disabled. Instead, we have either a parent come on with a kid, or a person or caregiver, someone that knows them," he said.

Saidah, originally from Beirut, Lebanon, lived with a cousin with special needs years ago. In 1985, right after the start of the Arab-Israeli conflict, Saidah, who is French Lebanese, came to live in Bloomfield, Ind.

After he joined up with a friend who had started a similar sailing program on the south coast of France in Antibes, where the organization still exists, Saidah's future goal was set in motion.

The amazing effect a day of sailing has on the children is all the evidence needed to show Heart of Sailing works. The program continues to flourish.

The transformation, he said, is at once simple and great.

"The people we are taking out have their own life set in a routine. Everything is done by clockwork, and they don't change much in their behavior. Most of them never went on a boat," Saidah said. "As you know, any human loves to be on the water," although he said he's not sure what it is, the rocking of the boat, the sun, the wind on their faces.

Before each sail, Saidah gives a safety lecture as well as a lecture on what he'll expect: tasks including

raising the sail and casting the anchor.

"We make it a game," he said of the actions needed to operate a sailboat, such as operating a tiller, turning the wheel and hoisting the sail.

"The cockpit of a sailboat is a place where there's little room," he added. In the intimate setting, children are put into a situation where they must participate and communicate in order to complete the task of sailing. He said the day begins as soon as the sailboat clears the marina. Kids are asked to hold the tiller or turn the vessel's wheel.

"Sailing is a complicated activity. It's not like a speedboat where you turn the key and go," he said. "They have to hoist the sails, we have to trim them, we need to do this and we need to do that – sometimes it can be tricky and sometimes they can't do it."

However, the point of the program isn't to train expert sailors; the focus is to offer the experience of sailing, however halting the trip may be.

"Sometimes we can't," Saidah said of the combination of first-time sailors and the new experience. "It is tricky."

However, in the hour and a half that's already lapsed in the experience, the kids and their caregivers begin to undergo the transformation – experiences and situations they previously thought they couldn't handle are done, and something magical starts to unravel. Laughter and talk replace the silence and fear held at the start of the activity, Saidah said.

After lunch – a quick meal of sandwiches put together and eaten onboard and usually comprised of the foods children are fond of – this transformation continues to unfold.

"We see the kid change at that point," he said, "after we hoist the sails again. We remove the anchor and they participate much more. There's a smile on their face, and they're laughing and singing. The non-verbal people try to express what they're doing."

Saidah has noticed parents and caregivers who go along on the sailing excursions usually experience as much fun as their children.

"I try to disconnect them from the kid. I take over the responsibility of dealing with the kid so they can relax. Sailing is very calming most of the time; when there's wind, there's a lot of action. It gives some scares to people in the beginning, especially when the boat is keeling," he said, adding the boats he uses, two 21-foot sailboats and one 25-foot sailboat, are heavy, and there is minimal risk of tipping.

"It gives them some thrills," he said. "They usually want to go fast."

He said the biggest challenge he must overcome is in disconnecting the caregiver from the child. "The parents are very anxious about what I'll think about the kid. If a child doesn't respond, they might try to intervene."

Saidah said this is of little consequence. Frequently the guided sails are conducted on days when waterways aren't very busy, and it makes no difference if the wheel is turned too far or if right comes out left.

"I don't care if the kid doesn't want to go left or right. As soon as they get the tiller or the wheel, they often want to turn it as far as they can in either direction," Saidah said.

The message he wants the children to pick up is one of freedom: They can do what they want.

"The power they have when they're behind the wheel is a sensation they would never have. Some parents say, 'My kid will never drive.' It's a challenge trying to get them to relax and allow the kids to do whatever they want without having to police them," he said.

However, Saidah said, at the same time, he experiences a sense of humility. As a parent, he's aware the parents are making a lifetime commitment to these special needs children.

Currently, Saidah said he's looking for people interested in donating the use of their boats for the event. He's conducted similar programs in Houston and Seattle and found donors in those cities.

"I'm not a sales type person," Saidah repeated, "but it's incredible the amount of interest this program generates."

To donate use of a boat to the event or to schedule a sail for a special needs child, call 812-935-7245 or e-mail george@heartofsailing.org.

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