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These sailors are showing heart

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Dave McCabe considered himself a self-appointed protector and caretaker of the mentally and physically challenged back when he was in school.

McCabe, who is retired from IBM, now shares the joy of sailing with children who have disabilities, such as Down syndrome, autism, cerebral palsy, blindness, deafness and other physical and emotional disorders.

"I'm not sure who gets more of the benefit out of it, whether it's the children, the families or (me)," McCabe said.

Last year, he launched the Texas chapter of an international nonprofit charitable foundation called Heart of Sailing with his own 38-foot Morgan sailboat — the Blue Marlin.

Today, eight other boats and their captains are part of the volunteer fleet.

McCabe, an active lifelong sailor, owns Blue Marlin Sailing School. He's also sailed across the Atlantic, which he says might have prompted Heart of Sailing International's Founder George Saidah to approach him.

"I began this chapter after the head of the foundation came down and said 'Hey Dave, I want you to start this down here.' Actually, he did not have to talk to me very much or twist my arm," McCabe said. "Because in my mind, I'd already accepted."

Saidah, a retired software entrepreneur, combined community service with his 35-year love of ocean sailing to create a unique form of recreational therapy for developmentally disabled children in 2004.

The following year, the foundation began offering sailing excursions. At the time, Saidah said, his goal was to start 20 regional chapters in five years.

"People thought I was crazy," he said.

But in just three years, Heart of Sailing has opened 25 chapters — two of them in Canada, one in France and the rest in the United States.

Saidah, who has a family member with a cognitive disorder, said the project "changed my life."

On the water

In favorable weather, McCabe and his guests are on the water seven days a week. Each outing lasts 2½ hours, which includes 30 minutes of safety procedures, gear checks, discussion of roles and responsibilities, as well as time to get acquainted.

"This is not a ride," McCabe said. "I will challenge them to do whatever they possibly can, including raising the sails, tying knots and steering the boat."

Parents can enroll their child on the foundation's Web site at www.heartofsailing.org.

The service is free and open to anyone who has a handicap.

"We don't turn anyone away," McCabe said.

The benefits to the children and their families are numerous, he said.

Working closely with others in a confined space provides social interaction and teamwork since everyone on the boat is assigned a job. Following instructions, crewing and navigating require communication and comprehension skills.

McCabe likes to talk to the children about the job of captain. Donning his white captain's hat, he tells them "I am the captain so I am the boss." But when it's their turn to navigate, he lets them wear the hat as a symbol of shared responsibility.

"I tell them 'I'm going to ask you to drive the boat so you'll wear the hat and you'll be the boss,'" McCabe said.

Sailing also enhances relaxation for everyone onboard. Open water journeys provide a sense of adventure and exploration — something families with special needs seldom have time or energy for.

Shelley Townsend found the foundation's Web site while doing research to help other parents of children with disabilities as part of her job with University of Houston's Parent Education Project - Families CAN.

She enrolled her 13-year-old daughter, Symone Brown, who has cerebral palsy. Mother and daughter sailed last June, on a day with plenty of sunshine and a nice breeze.

"It was wonderful," Townsend said. "It was so fantastic. I never expected anything like it. We had a great time."

She said her daughter sailed again last August.

"The captain is so good with the kids, he's so patient," Townsend said. "The experience makes them feel like they can do anything. It puts so much joy in their hearts."

Something for everyone

McCabe is surprised at how much the families enjoy sailing.

"Family members gain the satisfaction of seeing their child doing something they didn't think they could do," he said. "They can sit back, relax and enjoy the beauty of sailing."

Excursions require a parent or caregiver to accompany each child.

The foundation encourages the whole family to participate and they work to accommodate each family's schedule.

Since sailing is considered recreational therapy, children can often leave school to sail. McCabe welcomes repeat visits.

Time permitting, there is lunch aboard after sailing. Children get a certificate and a medallion to commemorate their excursion.

With parental permission, photos of the trip are posted on the foundation's Web site. McCabe always is looking for volunteer captains and seaworthy sailboats for the Heart of Sailing fleet.

Although the service he provides is free, he said the foundation accepts donations since sailing can be "quite costly."

McCabe's goals go far beyond fundraising and volunteers. He aspires to top the 150 children his Houston chapter served last year.

"Most of these kids have never had an opportunity to be on a sailboat," he said. "And what these kids can do, the self-esteem they walk away with, is just something."

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