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Sailor starts foundation to help those with disabilities

By Amy Bentley
Correspondent
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Courtesy photos Capt. George Saidah is pictured with 5-year-old Jacob "Jake" Hall of Seattle. Saidah started Heart of Sailing in 2004 to benefit those with cognitive and mental disabilities.

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Capt. George Saidah helps Jake hoist a sail. "It's so quiet and soothing. Sailing calms the kids. The tension relaxes. They become different people on the boat," Saidah said.

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Four years ago, George Saidah was a young retiree in his mid-40s and looking for something to do with his free time when he hit upon an idea.

A hobby sailor for most of his life, Saidah remembered his mentally handicapped cousin in their native Lebanon with whom he grew up and sailed.

He also thought about a friend in France who started a foundation seven years ago to help disabled children in France by taking them sailing.

"I woke up one day at 2 in the morning and said, This is what I am going to do," said Saidah, who lives in Indiana but travels often.

He visited his friend in France to learn more about his foundation and, in 2004, Saidah founded Heart of Sailing, a nonprofit organization in the United States and Canada for those with cognitive or mental disabilities.

Next week, Heart of Sailing launches its new Ventura chapter with three days of two-hour sailing trips planned for local families with a mentally handicapped or developmentally disabled family member.

Saidah will join the sailing trips from Ventura Harbor on one of his boats that he now keeps at the harbor, and friend Bill Kohut of Ventura, a retired petroleum engineer and local sailing enthusiast, will volunteer as sailing master. Kohut has plenty of experience, having lived aboard a boat in Ventura for six years and having sailed twice to Tahiti.

"I'm just going to see how it goes and not worry about it," said Kohut, about his coming experience.

The Ventura sailing excursions run throughout the days of Wednesday to June 5.

There is still space for more families to join.

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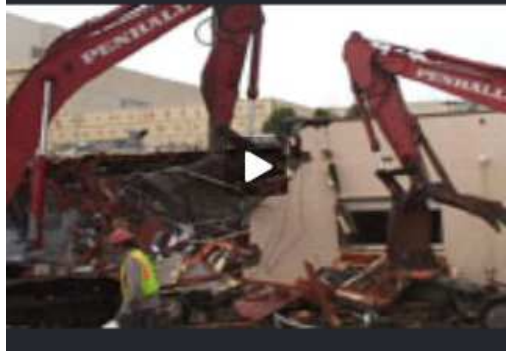
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The only requirement is that a family member is mentally disabled and a parent or caregiver must come, too. The entire family is welcome to sail, and families often take the trip together, Saidah said. There is a nominal registration fee of \$10 per person.

Saidah hopes to set up sailing trips from Ventura at least once a month with guests. Among the 1,700 passengers who have sailed with Heart of Sailing since it was founded are children as young as 3 to 75-year-olds.

Most are special-needs children or teens who have conditions like autism or Down syndrome.

"It's not a boat ride. Everybody works on the boat," Saidah explained. The passengers have the opportunity, based upon their abilities, to help hoist and trim the sails and learn the basics of how wind propels the sailboat.

Passengers can pilot the boat and learn about basic navigation. Excursions include a picnic-style lunch and conclude with the special-needs passengers receiving a medal and commemorative certificate in recognition of their service as crew members.

"They love it. We push their limits, and we make them do things they've never done before, things that their parents didn't even think they could do," Saidah said. "Parents would say, 'He can't do that,' and we say, 'Relax and take out your camera and watch what will happen.'"

The experience of sailing and helping on the boat leads to a tremendous boost of self-confidence for these special passengers, many of whom start out afraid but end up loving the experience and the water.

"It's so quiet and soothing. Sailing calms the kids. The tension relaxes. They become different people on the boat," Saidah said.

Heart of Sailing's Web site, at heartofsailing.org, notes the therapeutic benefits of sailing for the mentally handicapped.

The sailing trips foster social interaction, teamwork and communication; help develop motor skills, coordination and concentration; and build confidence.

For many participants, this is their first opportunity to enjoy the sensations associated with sailing: the feeling of the wind, the movement of the waves and the sounds as the boat moves through the water.

Saidah travels around and always tries to sail with a new chapter. A retired software company owner, Saidah, 49, moved to the United States 23 years ago.

Heart of Sailing has 28 chapters and locations around California and several other locations, including Washington, New Jersey, Boston, Atlanta, Florida, Georgia, Indiana, Vancouver and more.

Local boat owners also offer the use of their sailboats or their time to lead trips, using one of Saidah's boats.

There are no paid staff members, and Heart of Sailing is always seeking volunteer sailors and boat owners to help with excursions.

For more information or to register for a sailing trip, visit <http://www.heartofsailing.org> and link to "Sail with Us." Or call 866-368-5350 or 812-935-SAIL (7245).

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