



David McGinnis (center), who has autism, demonstrates unfurling the headsail on one of skipper De Henderson's (left) 22-foot sailboats, moored at his marina on Tomahawk Bay, on the Columbia River. McGinnis was accompanied by his older sister, Donilee McGinnis. McGinnis learned this skill on an outing with the nonprofit organization Heart of Sailing.

Special kids make waves by steering a sailboat

Therapy - A nonprofit brings the experience of sailing to young people with special needs

Thursday, May 15, 2008

JENN DIRECTOR KNUDSEN *The Oregonian*

Brandon Barnett has 6-year-old triplet sons. Skylar, the fraternal brother of identical twins Connor and Spencer, has autism and cerebral palsy.

The Beaverton family regularly divides up, even for mundane outings; one parent will take the identical twins while the other focuses on Skylar. The family has difficulty finding activities that can accommodate everyone.

So when Barnett, 39, caught wind of Heart of Sailing, a nonprofit "nautical adventure" program for children and young adults with special needs, the Intel manager recalls thinking, "What an opportunity!"

On a Heart of Sailing excursion, each child -- age 3 and older -- sports a life vest and steers the boat. Each dons a captain's hat. Each gets a medal and certificate at the end of the languid one-hour tour on the Columbia River.

"He probably doesn't realize he was steering the boat," Barnett said of Skylar during their sail. "But he did know he was the center of attention." The family plans to participate again.

Last year, Heart of Sailing brought its program to Portland, offering numerous sails on the river as a form of recreational therapy, including a June 21 summer kickoff.

Nearly 50 young people -- from Washington, Multnomah, Clackamas, Yamhill, Douglas and Lane counties - have been on an excursion.

The nonprofit has chapters worldwide, including Jacksonville, Fla.; San Diego; Seattle; Montreal; Quebec; and Antibes, France. The nonprofit organization, which set sail four years ago, is the brainchild of entrepreneur and sailing enthusiast George Saidah, 49, a Lebanese-born Frenchman living in Bloomington, Ind.

Roughly 80 percent of Heart of Sailing participants are on the autism spectrum; some are nonverbal and others are high-functioning. Regardless, routine is key and new experiences can be frightening.

"But," Saidah said in a phone interview, "they like water. They're drawn to it. There is some therapeutic part to it."

Eric Hamblen is program director and co-owner of Project P.A.C.E. Inc., a Beaverton agency that works with families of children who have special needs, concentrating on autism. A year ago, he attended an autism conference in Chicago and came upon Saidah, staffing a booth.

Saidah recalled Hamblen declaring, "What are you doing here? Sailing at an autism conference? What's the catch?"

Saidah explained sailing's advantages to people with special needs: Self-confidence. Independence. Calm. And family members are awestruck, observing their kids' abilities and, often, unbridled joy.

Hamblen, 40, was sold and helped bring Heart of Sailing to the Portland metro area.

David McGinnis, 19, of Scappoose is among those who've taken part in the excursions. McGinnis, a student in Westview High School's program for students with autism, recently demonstrated at Portland's Island Sailing Center the skills he's gleaned.

Wearing only an olive-green fleece sweatshirt and jeans in a pelting rain, McGinnis stepped aboard a Capri 22-foot sailboat and trimmed the blue-and-white headsail. The center's owner and skipper, De Henderson, 38, and McGinnis' older sister Donilee McGinnis -- Heart of Sailing's local director of public relations -- lent support.

David McGinnis smiled. He waved. And soon, he sat down in the cockpit to enjoy the gentle swaying of the moored boat in the marina at Dock D.

"It's rocking," McGinnis said. He placed his hands on the bench, absorbed by the boat's movements.

Later, he said his favorite memory from the Heart of Sailing excursion was "the steer." He explained: "You're like the captain; you're on the water. You control your own boat."

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