



PHOTO BY JIM POWERS

# Sail To Prevail, Sail to Win

BY CHRISTY BASSETT BAKER ■  
PHOTOS COURTESY OF SAIL TO PREVAIL

For some, August is the beginning of the end: Time to think about heading back to school, or returning to the office.

This page: Top, Paul Callahan of Sail To Prevail, at the helm of one of the organization's vessels. Paralyzed as a young man after an accident at Harvard, Callahan went on to create this sailing program which gives opportunities to get out on the water for children and adults with varying degrees of disabilities, including children on the autism spectrum.



Sail To Prevail works closely with the Nantucket S.T.A.R. program to provide free sailing experiences for children. Below is Kim Horyn, in the red T-shirt and white baseball cap, who heads up Nantucket's Autism Resource Center, which also benefits from Sail To Prevail's programs.

For those of us on Nantucket, the northeasterly winds are just bringing in the dog days of summer and life on the water is heating up. The Boston Pops perform on Jetties Beach, sending ripples of sound across the harbor. The daylight hours crash not only heat waves on-island, but slews of fish are brought to shore. As August pushes forward, so do the happenings, with Nantucket Race Week catapulting the entire community together onto the water.

Amidst the mayhem sails a soothing environment and program known as Sail To Prevail, steered by Paul Callahan. The mission of Sail To Prevail is to create opportunities for disabled children and adults to overcome adversity through therapeutic sailing. It's a mission pioneered by Callahan himself, who in January 2012 won the U.S. Paralympic Trials in the Sonar class, in Miami, Fla. Callahan, the number-one ranked disabled sailor in the United States, will represent the U.S. in London at the Paralympic Games at the end of the month. A C4-5 quadriplegic, he has far exceeded the limitations once imposed on him by the medical community. He doesn't believe in the word "impossible." He believes if you give 110 percent you can really accomplish anything, a message he's made his life's mission to share and one that has led Sail To Prevail to conquer many shores.

Nearly 16 years ago, Callahan was invited to join the nonprofit Sail To Prevail, and started a program serving Nantucket in 2009. He was preparing to leave his position at Goldman Sachs in New York, and thought the program was a great idea, but it lacked the necessary management, leadership and disciplinary skills to succeed. Callahan agreed to sign on for six months to help keep the organization afloat. With a



degree from Harvard College, an MBA from the Harvard Business School and years of experience on Wall Street, Callahan took the helm and began transforming the foundation into the present-day Sail To Prevail. Callahan himself began sailing in 1994, 15 years after he slipped on a wet surface and broke his neck, leaving him a quadriplegic. Callahan immediately saw the impact Sail To Prevail could have.

"Sailing teaches you independence more than any other sport. It teaches you teamwork and it teaches you leadership in a group-dynamic setting," he said. Callahan has tirelessly traveled the country sharing this message. If a roadblock arose and he was told it couldn't be done, he did it anyway. Today, Sail To Prevail has helped more than 10,000 people with disabilities in multiple states.

Sail To Prevail isn't just a program to get children on the water; it's a program that helps foster

confidence and courage. Rather than sit and be a passenger on board, all crew members are encouraged to be active participants in sailing the boats. Steering the boat, grinding winches and trimming sails are all opportunities offered to anyone participating in the program.

"Just going for a boat ride is not the philosophy, it's important for anybody to learn how to give more than to take out of this world. But I think that disabled people have much more to give than people realize," Callahan said.

Sail To Prevail offers programs for just about everyone, including those with both physical and developmental disabilities. Its emotional-therapy program is dedicated to those experiencing emotional trauma and seeks to enhance aspects derived from the soothing, comforting environment of sailing. There is the "Sail Away from Cancer" program, designed for pediatric cancer patients to sail with

Everyone is all smiles after a day out on the water, thanks to Paul Callahan, Alex Egan and the folks at Sail To Prevail.



The Nantucket Lightship is anchored in the harbor, while one of the adults in the Sail To Prevail program rows out toward it.

resident doctors and family, in hopes of creating an "out of hospital experience." There is a program for disabled veterans returning from war, which includes dedicated clinics and free sailing excursions. There is a program designed specifically for those with autism, which assigns specific tasks to each and every crew member to help improve focus and concentration skills. At Fort Adams State Park, in Newport, R.I., Sail To Prevail offers a "Confidence is Cool" program, a camp for children 7 to 17 with all disabilities. The camp combines sailing with other recreational therapeutic activities, some of which are swimming, biking (hand-cycling), surfing and field trips. These programs help rejuvenate the mind and build confidence in the children and adults.

"Teaching people how to sail draws out other great characteristics in one's own personal fabric. It allows them to participate socially and culturally and offers a platform for them to give back in their own way. The disabled have so much talent pent up inside them. Sail To Prevail is a way to draw that out of them while being able to participate in the same activity as able-bodied people," Callahan said.

While Sail To Prevail has reached thousands of people, its core remains intimate and focused. Programs are offered in Newport and Middletown, R.I., and most recently Nantucket. In 2008, Arthur Shlossman of Jamestown, R.I. donated the well-known 66-foot America's Cup sailing yacht *Easterner* to the program. Callahan immediately knew what to do with the 12-meter: Create a vessel that could be used as a therapeutic tool, through giving crew-members of all disabilities the opportunity to sail.

"It's one of those stories where they said it couldn't be done; but if a select few privileged, able-bodied people can operate a boat, why can't the disabled do it as well?" Callahan said. He immediately began working with a team of naval architects and engineers to adapt *Easterner* into the first-ever 12-meter America's Cup boat to be handled by crew-members with physical disabilities. *Easterner* is now used to race other 12-meters at the elite level, with combined crews of disabled and able-bodied members working together. In 2009 *Easterner* competed and placed in the 12-Meter World



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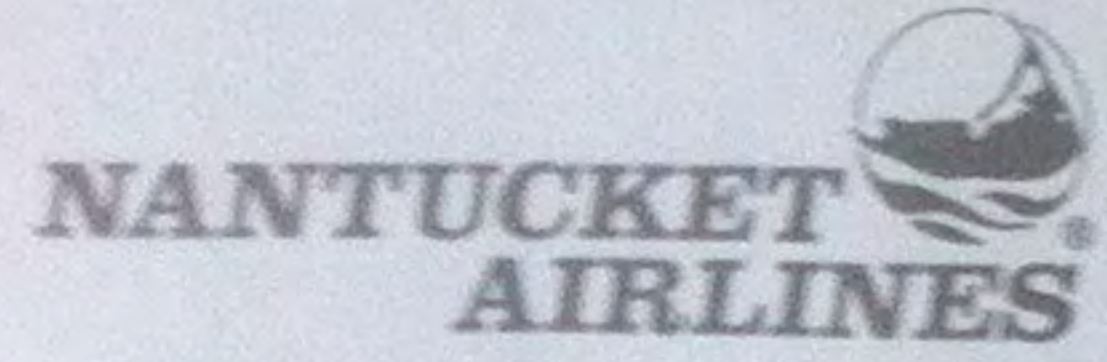
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Championships, earning fifth overall in the Traditional class. *Easterner* doesn't just sail competitively. The 12-meter regularly provides therapeutic sailing in different locations for children with developmental disabilities, autism-spectrum disorders or pediatric cancer.

"We found a mother with an autistic child on the dock on Nantucket, and the next thing you know we had 10 of them. From there after for two summers with the 12-meter we took three days of disabled children and we were at capacity. So the next year we did a week of programming on the 12-meter. Then we realized there was a pent-up demand and an anonymous donor donated a boat to stay in Nantucket. One of the things important to the Nantucket residents was that the children on-island should be the recipients of funds raised on-island. I have a strong opinion on that: The funds we raise here, stay here."

In 2011 the Nantucket chapter of Sail To Prevail was formed, with daily sailing classes offered on-island. The anonymously-donated boat, a 20-foot Independence, was an integral part of the program on-island. The vessel has been custom-designed to accommodate a wide spectrum of disabilities and welcome sailors from all backgrounds. The vessel contains two swiveling supported seats for those in wheelchairs, from which participants can steer the boat or grind winches and trim sails. The boat can accommodate up to five sailors and one instructor on board, a capacity that encourages families and friends, first-timers and the experienced to join in. So far the cost to participate is free, thanks to the support of generous donors and organizations.

"The network and word of mouth among disabled parents is extraordinary. They seem to do a great job of promoting programs, especially on Nantucket. Fortunately we haven't yet charged anyone for our services on the island. Hopefully we'll be able to keep that going for as long as we can. No disabled child or family has had to pay for our services to date because we've been able to fund it. My goal is to keep that going as long as possible," Callahan said.

The Great Harbor Yacht Club annually hosts a cocktail party fundraiser in late July for the program, an event that resulted in the donated boat. The Nantucket Boat Basin annually donates seasonal dockage for the vessel, giving the program a home-port on-island. Other island contributors include Grey Lady Marine, Cape Air, the Beachside Hotel and Glyn's Marine. While support from these organizations has helped the program grow, the demand is high and growing by the day.

"I have families beginning in March asking 'When is sailing going to begin?'" said Tina

Steadman, director of operations and programing at Nantucket S.T.A.R. (Sports and Therapeutic/Accessible Recreation).

S.T.A.R. is one of the direct benefactors of the Sail To Prevail program, as well as Autism Speaks and Family and Children's Services.

"Sail To Prevail, or STP, has that winning combination of excellence and an 'anything is possible' attitude. We are so fortunate to have them on-island for our summer programming. Our S.T.A.R. participants feel an increased sense of self-esteem and pride. It is such an adventure for them. Many of them conquer their fears. They get that tiller in their hands and they feel like they can do anything. I appreciate how STP provides our local special-needs community access to one of Nantucket's richest resources, its waterfront. It provides them with opportunities that many of their peers have. You really can't get any better than that," Steadman said.

The only thing better may be seeing how far a disabled sailor really can go, and that the impossible does not exist. If there ever were a hero to show us this, it will be Callahan himself when he competes in the Paralympics.

"I honestly don't think I would be doing an Olympic, Paralympic campaign if I didn't have a reason to do it. The real reason why I do it is that I can show the participants at Sail To Prevail that everything can be done if you put your heart and soul into it. The only gift that I've been given is that I've realized it's better to share and utilize your talents for the greater good. A lot of people helped me. My obligation is to help other people. Sailing is a metaphor for life and one of the important things is assembling the best team possible. The will to win is a very powerful weapon, but the will to share is far more powerful," Callahan said.

Callahan and his teammates, Tom Brown and Bradley Johnson, will compete Aug. 31-Sept. 5 in Weymouth and Portland, England. Combined, the three already bring four Paralympic medals to the crew, and their sights are set high on gold for Team USA. While the team has its sights set on a medal, Callahan's thoughts are never far from his most prized achievement to date, the Sail To Prevail program.

"The real goal at Sail To Prevail is not only to teach disabled children how to sail, but really to teach them to overcome adversity in other parts of their daily lives so when they encounter a challenge they can rely on the positive experience and challenge that they overcame while sailing on Nantucket Harbor," he said.

*Christy Beattie Baker grew up on Nantucket and still lives on the island, where she is the communications manager at the Nantucket Boat Basin. She writes occasionally for Nantucket Today.*



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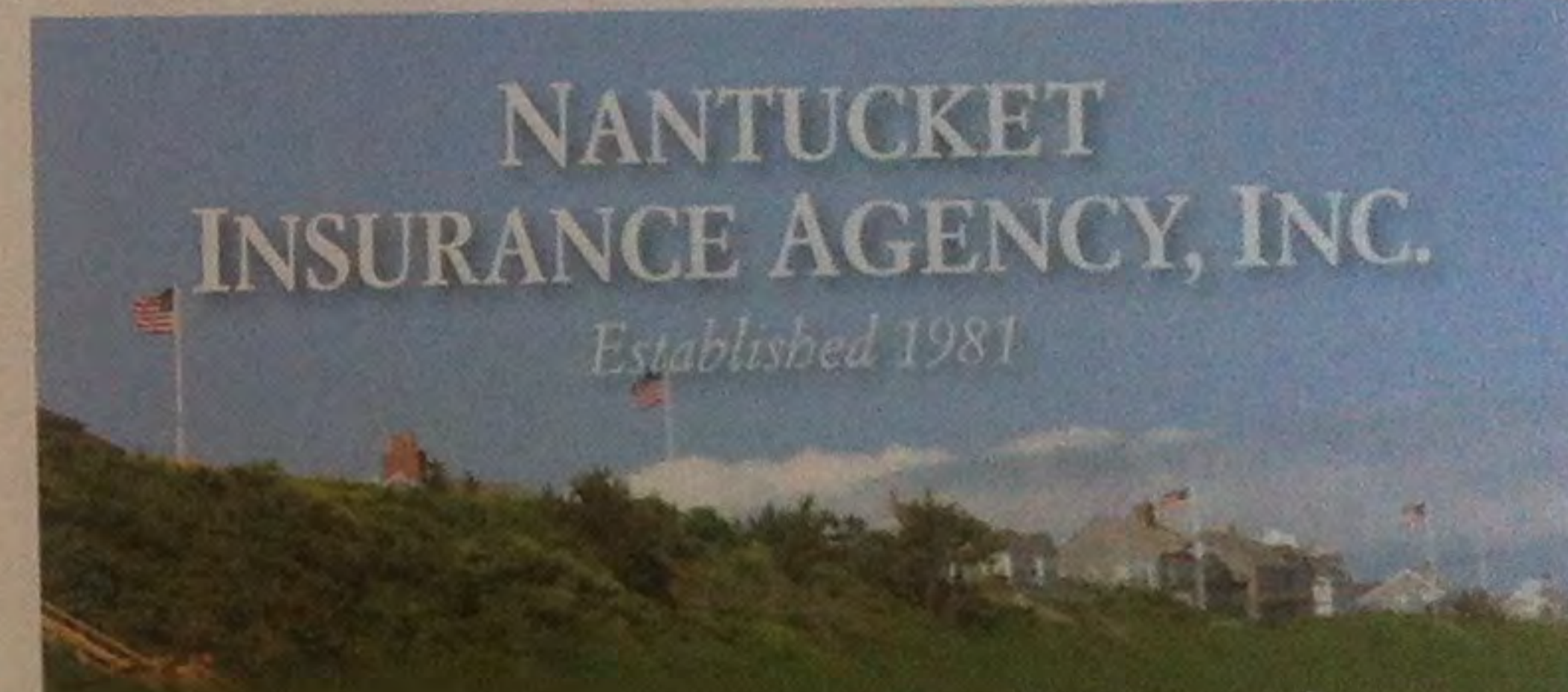
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