

The Newport Daily News

August 14, 2012

Still sailing, still prevailing

Former Shake-A-Leg organization celebrates 30 years of helping people with disabilities



Daily News file photo

Shake-A-Leg, founded in 1982 in Newport, became Sail to Prevail in 2010 and this year is celebrating 30 years of helping people with disabilities, mainly through sailing programs like the one shown in this picture from 2005. The local organization has evolved from its beginning as a post-hospital rehabilitative program with therapists.

By Sean Flynn
Daily News staff

It was a beautiful Newport summer night in June 1981 when Harry Horgan, then 22, fell from a moving Jeep and suffered a spinal cord injury that paralyzed him from the waist down. He had just graduated from Providence College.

Vinny Integlia was 18 when he ran and dived into the water at Third Beach in Middletown in 1978. His spinal cord injury left him a quadriplegic.

Paul Callahan was 21 and a junior at Harvard University when he slipped on a floor, fell and broke his neck in 1977. He also became a quadriplegic.

Horgan founded Shake-A-Leg, a rehabilitation program for people with spinal cord injuries and neurological disorders, in the summer of 1982. The organization was based at the Boys & Girls Clubs of Newport County's headquarters on Church Street, and Integlia, who is now a motivational speaker and author, was one of the early personalities associated with it.

Callahan took over from Horgan as chief executive officer of Shake-A-Leg in 1996

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PAUL CALLAHAN
chief executive officer
of Sail to Prevail

and changed its name two years ago to Sail to Prevail. The organization is celebrating its 30th anniversary this summer.

(Horgan still runs an independent Shake-A-Leg program in Miami.)

The local organization has undergone changes over the years. It was founded as a post-hospital rehabilitative program with therapists, and sailing slowly became a natural extension of the program, said Robie Pierce, director of sailing for Shake-A-Leg from 1989 to 2006.

The rehabilitation program moved around over the years, relocating from the Boys & Girls Clubs to the University

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of Rhode Island to the Our Mother of Hope Novitiate in Portsmouth. The program returned to URI before moving to the former Edgehill facility in Newport and finally to Salve Regina University, Pierce said. The sailing component of the program, which grew in importance, took place from the docks at Fort Adams State Park in Newport.

"It's changed the lives of thousands of people over the 30 years, not only the participants, but also the staff," Pierce said. "It changed my life."

He was diagnosed with multiple sclerosis 27 years ago and has used a wheelchair for the past 22 years.

"I could identify with the people coming in," Pierce said.

Now the program focuses on sailing, mainly for children between the ages of 7 and 17. They make up about 80 percent of Sail to Prevail clients, Callahan said. The other 20 percent are older and include a large number of veterans, he said.

About 1,000 clients participate each summer in Sail to Prevail programs, the main one offered at Fort Adams State Park. The organization also runs a program in Nantucket and conducts clinics in St. Petersburg, Fla., Callahan said.

"What's really important for Sail to Prevail, is it creates an opportunity for children with disabilities to overcome challenges in their lives," Callahan said. "We use sailing as a tool to make that happen. Disabled children get instant gratification in learning how to sail — to participate and not just spectate. We can instill positive experiences in them so when they face difficulties, they will have an easier time learning



Contributed photo

Paul Callahan, a Paralympic sailor and CEO of Sail to Prevail, is shown with children in the organization's sailing program. "Being a quadriplegic and winning the U.S. trials so that I can now represent our nation in the London Paralympics has given great credibility to Sail to Prevail," he said recently.

to conquer something they never thought possible before."

Sail to Prevail also runs a camp called "Confidence is Cool" for children with severe disabilities, usually in the 7-to-10 age bracket, who come for one-week programs to learn to sail.

"They give the children some independence, and all them get to be with other children with disabilities," Callahan said. "It's a great thing to see how they watch each other and learn from each other. They become participants instead of spectators."

Anywhere from 50 to 70 children participate in the Confidence program over the summer.

"It's a small part of what we do, but it's a very important part," Callahan said. "I wouldn't be running Sail to Prevail if I didn't think I could have a meaningful impact on these children. It's what drives me to compete all the way to the Paralympics. It shows the kids firsthand that they can achieve more than they ever thought they could."

Callahan was the skipper of a three-man crew that won the U.S. trials in the Sonar class of 24-foot sailboats earlier this year and will represent the United States in London Aug. 29-Sept. 20 at the Paralympic Games, designed for competitors with disabilities. For the past three years, he's been in training with teammates Brad Johnson from Florida and Tom Brown from Maine.

They have competed for seven of the past 16 months, mostly in England but also in France and the Scandinavian countries.

"It's one of those things you have to be passionate about," Callahan said. "Much of the time is spent on the water or in classrooms, so the training is not as glamorous as it sounds. We had to be there to sail against European sailors over the past two years. The only way we could improve our game was to sail against people who were as good or better than us."

That experience motivates him to help the clients who come to Sail to Prevail programs, Callahan said.

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The organization's mission has expanded to include many kinds of disabilities, including "children with pediatric cancer and a wide spectrum of autism," Callahan said. "We bring them together and give them goals to achieve individually, but they are together in achieving their goals."

The program has eight sailboats at Fort Adams and a 12-meter yacht *Easterner*, which participated in the 1958 America's Cup competition. The yacht was retrofitted to make it handicapped accessible, Callahan said.

"It's the first America's Cup contender to be sailed by a partially disabled crew," he said.

Most of the participants come from an area that is within a two-hour drive of Newport, but some people come from other parts of the country and stay with friends or at local hotels, he said.

"Everyone wants to come to Newport, the greatest sailing venue in the country," Callahan said. "There's a real cachet to sailing in such a historic venue."

Many participants leave the Sail to Prevail program with a different outlook on life, he said.

"No matter who you are, we've all been given breaks and opportunities in life," Callahan said. "I was able to go to Harvard University and earn a living at Goldman Sachs. Now I have an important responsibility to help people with disabilities."

"I'm in a powered wheelchair and don't have use of my hands, but I have managed to go through life fairly well. I have a great wife and two twin boys."