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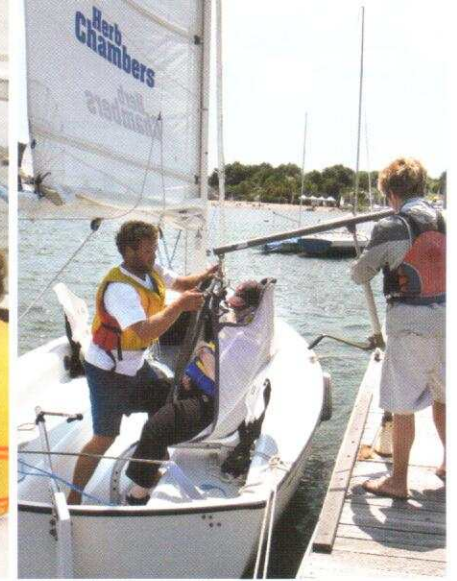
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SAILING

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PREVAILING WINDS

THIRTY YEARS AGO,

a little organization popped up in Newport to help disabled kids experience a better life through sailing. Now, it's celebrating three decades of overcoming adversity while its leader competes in the London Paralympics next month. So what's next for Paul Callahan and his family of children at **SAIL TO PREVAIL?**

ANNIE SHERMAN finds out.



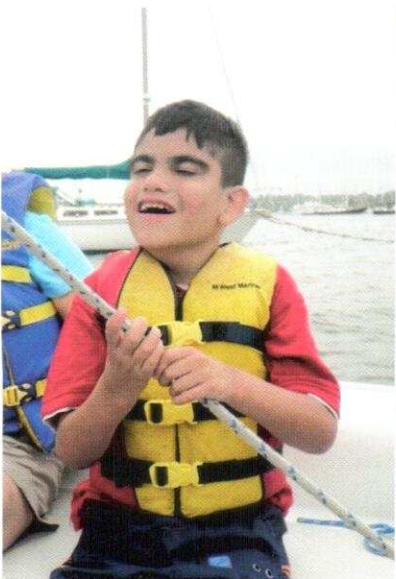


THE PARALYMPIC GOLD MEDAL IS IN PAUL CALLAHAN'S SIGHTS.

It's a light at the end of the tunnel in a long training campaign that has taken him around the globe and back, encompassing years of preparations and heartache. For Paul, winning the gold might be a vindication of all the sacrifices that everyone involved has made.

But that is only part of what this accomplished sailor and businessman hopes to attain. And it's not even for himself, he says, but for the kids at Sail To Prevail who are counting on him to succeed. "I don't think I would do a Paralympic campaign if I weren't running Sail To Prevail," he says. "At the heart of it, winning the gold medal is driven by the fact that all those energies, all my experiences and lessons learned, can be funneled back into the organization. In one, you see the other's success."

For 15 years, Callahan has been CEO of Sail To Prevail, a non-profit that helps children with mental and physical disabilities overcome obstacles by sailing. Operated out of Sail Newport, Sail To Prevail (formerly Shake-A-Leg) has helped nearly 1,000 children and their parents communicate, build confidence, and most importantly, have a moment to breathe amid their complicated medical battles. With the debilitating diseases and disabilities these





children face, from cancer and autism to deafness, blindness and spinal problems, Callahan says those relaxing moments are rare. "I look at it as a way to push through goals for confidence building, to overcome challenges in their daily lives," he says. "The neat thing about it is that they can invite their families onboard to interact with them like they're the host. They're growing together."

Indeed, these children are growing. Secured snugly in their adapted sailboats with tiller in hand, the smiles on their faces indicate a bigger kind of growth and success. Callahan remembers one remarkable boy who came sailing several years ago – it was a welcome reprieve from his institutionalized care and for his weary parents. "Once we got him on the sailboat, he lit up emotionally, physically, verbally – his positive energy was amazing," Callahan says. "Obviously he was happy, but watching his parents overcome with emotion that their child could finally interact with the elements and other people, that he was in sync with the boat, was a breakthrough. And it was an eye-opener to realize how much the kids' success means to their families."

The organization that brought them there is growing too. Celebrating 30 years this year, it is looking ahead to reach more kids with additional programs, and hopefully gain support. "We introduce a lot of people to Sail To Prevail," says board member Dean Gestal, who met Callahan on a pilgrimage to Lourdes, France in the



"I've been given a gift."

—PAUL CALLAHAN

mid-1990s. They struck up a conversation on the plane, and have been friends ever since. "It's all about the children. If we can reach 1,000 kids, we can reach 2,000. It's the little steps, and we're staying focused."

As they reach 30, they're hitting an inflection point, Callahan says, where they're affecting able-bodied people as much as disabled. Sharing that process becomes all the more imperative, so other groups can adopt that message to help children elsewhere. "I do my best to distribute our knowledge, because the more disabled people who get out on the water across the country, the more effective we continue to be," Callahan says. "As a national disabled sailing program, it's all about spreading the word."

He'll be going non-stop as the London Paralympics approach, spreading the word in his own souped-up wheelchair, thankful that he has the chance to show these kids the path to success. He doesn't want to let anyone down, so his eye will be set on both prizes – the golden medal around his neck, and the kids' smiles once they've experienced sailing for the first time. "The great part will be to share it with other people with physical challenges," he says. "Being disabled, I've been given a gift. It's my responsibility to take that gift and combine all the good-natured efforts and warm hearts of people who want to help, and help them believe that anything is truly possible if they put their minds to it." ❖

London Paralympics: August 29 through September 9
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