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Confinement to a wheelchair has not stopped Sarah Everhart-Skeels from becoming an accomplished sailor.

The Wind AT THEIR BACKS

By Bob Gulla

Sailors with disabilities are overcoming obstacles and achieving success with help from two nonprofit organizations.

Patrick Feighan of Middletown has been through a lot in his 36 years. Wheelchair-bound and nonverbal, he was born with multiple disabilities, including Down Syndrome, cerebral palsy, seizure disorder and autism. Recently, he was confined to a hospital following a surgery that unfortunately coincided with the COVID-19 outbreak. He couldn't leave the hospital — or see his mother, Cynthia — for five months.

During the course of Patrick's life, he's been involved in lots of different sports and activities, including the Special Olympics. He can't play many coordinated team games, but according to Cynthia, he's a great spectator. There is one sport, however, that truly lifts Patrick's spirits.

"When he's sailing, he's a whole different person," Cynthia says. "It's like a miracle. As soon as the boat gets underway and he hears the sounds and feels the movement of the boat on the water, something changes in him."

Patrick's been sailing for half his life. With the exception of last year, he's

Ro Fernandez/Andes Visual
Courtesy of Sail To Prevail



CLOCKWISE FROM TOP: Sailboats are retrofitted with swiveling seats to accommodate sailors with special needs. Patrick Feighan wears a fully adaptive seat harness to ensure balance. A youngster pilots a boat aided by the instructor's extension tiller.



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faithfully committed to boating as a member of Sail to Prevail, a national disabled sailing program. When it was established in 1982, Sail to Prevail became the first program of its kind for people with disabilities in the United States. "Patrick is a great kid," says Paul Callahan, Sail to Prevail's chief executive officer. "He has been one of our most dedicated participants and it's been a joy to have him with us."

Callahan is a quadriplegic himself. A tragic slip-and-fall accident in college left him wheelchair-bound. Following the accident, he managed to persevere. He graduated from both Harvard undergrad and Harvard Business School, and subsequently embarked on a successful career at Goldman Sachs.

Callahan is also a sailor. He began his own love affair with the sport back in 1996, while on

vacation in Newport. "I'll always remember that first day of sailing," he says. "I was able to get out of my chair and leave my worries on the dock. I felt an extraordinary sense of independence." Now a Newport resident, Callahan went on to parlay that sense of independence into a full-on, purpose-driven sailing career, one that includes being a two-time USA Sailing Paralympian.

"My sailing career has been as much about the journey as it has been about the goal of getting to the Paralympics," he says. "But my greatest takeaway, what I was able to come away with from the Paralympic campaign, was that when I finished I had so much to share with other people with disabilities."

Today, Sail to Prevail has a staff of sailing instructors running a fleet of specially adapted 20-foot sailboats suited to a wide spectrum of



CLOCKWISE FROM UPPER LEFT:
A young sailor receives guidance
from an instructor. A Sail to
Prevail group departs from Fort
Adams State Park. Sail to Prevail
CEO Paul Callahan. Army veteran
Walter Seeba takes the tiller of an
Independence 20 in 2014.



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physical, psychological and disease-based disabilities.

Since the organization's inception, more than 21,000 children and adults have enjoyed the amazing therapeutic benefits of sailing. The inaugural season began 20 years ago with eight sailors and has blossomed into a nationally recognized program. Sail to Prevail is fully booked for this summer, so Callahan is searching for ways to open up more spots.

"I'm just extremely blessed to have had the opportunities that I did with sailing," Callahan says, "and I just felt the obligation to share it."

Callahan left Goldman Sachs to start this sailing program. "We have nine different categories of sailors," he says. "They range from spinal cord injuries to pediatric cancer, autism and epilepsy. We

also accommodate veterans."

Boat adaptations vary as widely as the sailors' disabilities. Some are designed depending on the role the sailor plays on the boat, while others are designed to simply accommodate a specific disability. Some boats are mechanically modified, while others can be adapted without modification to the vessel. Boats can be wheelchair accessible, or equipped with an assembly that drops the seated sailor into the vessel. A gimbal seat, another adaptation designed for quadriplegic sailors, is fixed in the center of the boat. The seat rotates around a cylinder in the base to keep the skipper upright when the boat heels. The adaptations are nearly as remarkable as the sailors themselves.

Sail to Prevail also has a unique program in an alliance with Hasbro



The C. Thomas Clagett, Jr. Memorial Clinic and Regatta empowers disabled sailors to excel.

Children's Hospital, in which they invite a chemotherapy patient and their siblings out on a boat with their doctor. "The patient benefits from getting away from treatment, and the doctor benefits because they'll never see their pediatric patient again in the same way," Callahan says. "Now that they've sailed together as a team on a boat, they've changed that doctor-patient relationship for the better."

Sail to Prevail also goes a long way in helping to heal the parents of participants. "What this does for my heart — my mother heart — is that it begins to heal me, as well," Cynthia Feighan says. "Sailing is not another one of those things that Patrick can't do with other kids. It makes me feel so good that he's experiencing this one amazing thing where there are no limits for him."


Water is the Great Equalizer

Sarah Everhart-Skeels remembers the first time she ever sailed as a quadriplegic. "I like my chair," she says, pointing to the one she's sitting in. "My chair helps me get around. I'm in it all the time. But getting on the water was a whole new experience. I could leave everything on the dock and go out into the water where no one knew anything about me. I could leave that 'disabled' stamp behind and get in the boat where we were all working toward the same goal."

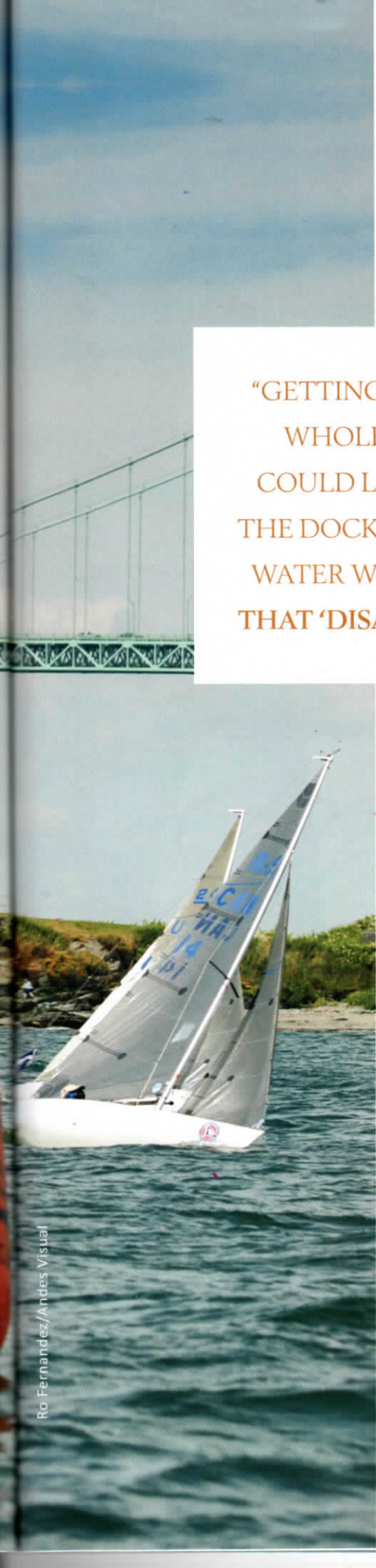
Prior to the accident in 1990 that robbed her of mobility from the waist down, Everhart-Skeels had defined herself by her athleticism. She had been a cyclist, a swimmer, a triathlete. A car struck her

bike while she was training. Despite her disability, though, the Little Compton resident continues to define herself the same way. She's still a competitive athlete. She's a Paralympic sailor. She swims long distances, and recently even skied Tuckerman's Ravine in New Hampshire. You can hear the confidence and candor in her voice, and you can see the feisty competitiveness in her eye.

"The best way to motivate someone like me is to tell me that I can't do something," she says with a wry smile. "'You're breaking the rules, Sarah. You're never going to do this, Sarah. You might as well get used to it.' I'm still going to do it because I don't like other people deciding for me who I am."



The 2021 C. Thomas Clagett, Jr. Memorial Clinic and Regatta and the U.S. Para Sailing Championships will be held August. 24-29.



In her chair at the Fort Adams docks, she looks out at the water with a combination of awe and admiration. "When you sail, you're basically harnessing Mother Nature," she says. "You're studying nature, thinking about the elements, and using the environment to get the boat moving as fast as possible."

"GETTING ON THE WATER WAS A WHOLE NEW EXPERIENCE. I COULD LEAVE EVERYTHING ON THE DOCK AND GO OUT INTO THE WATER WHERE ... I COULD LEAVE THAT 'DISABLED' STAMP BEHIND."

In addition to being a competitive athlete and sailor, Sarah is a board member for the C. Thomas Clagett, Jr. Memorial Clinic and Regatta, an organization that gives sailors with disabilities the opportunity to enhance their skills and reach their personal levels of achievement. Where Sail to Prevail is designed as a therapeutic program, Clagett is about sailors with disabilities competing, racing, training and winning.

"Twenty people who medaled in the Paralympics sailed at Clagett at one point," says Judy Clagett McLennan, a Portsmouth resident who serves as president of Clagett's Board of Directors. "Unfortunately, the Paralympics no longer recognizes sailing, which really was a blow."

The organization began back in 2002, when a small group of enthusiasts gathered to discuss how to elevate sailors with disabilities to an elite level. The organization's namesake, Tom Claggett, an avid Chesapeake sailor and ebullient personality, had been paralyzed with meningitis as a youth. He was fortunate that his condition was temporary. But it left him with a respect and appreciation for the accomplishments that disabled persons are able to achieve. When

he passed away in 2001, a group of family and friends decided to enshrine his sailing legacy in the form of a competitive event for sailors with disabilities. The inaugural regatta took place in 2003.

"These sailors are competitors above all," says McLennan. "They are treated no differently than anybody else. And their disabilities range a great deal, from disease-driven like MF [Muscular Fibrosis] to someone like Tracy Schmitt, who was born with no legs and two partial arms, and is now a sought-after motivational speaker.

"She wanted so badly to compete," McLennan says, "she sold everything she had to buy a boat, a van and a trailer, and she ended up becoming a medal-winning sailor."

Everhart-Skeels, like many sailors at Clagett, is also indefatigable. "I love competing on the water because it's an absolutely level playing field, so it becomes more about how you can be the best athlete you can be, given what physical tools you have."

She pushed her own limits as a sailor, falling just short of Olympic qualification. That said, in her quest to qualify, she traveled around the world — from Italy to Australia. She sailed against elite competition and created lifelong friendships along the way. "It was an adventure!" Everhart-Skeels says. "An adventure is defined as an activity of unknown outcome, so in my mind, most adventures are worth a shot.

"When I'm sailing, I feel whole," she adds. "I feel comfortable. I don't look at my disability as a negative. I look at it as a life experience."

As we talk on a dock in Fort Adams State Park, a ferry boat filled with children floats by. They're singing together as loudly as their collective voices will go. "You can hear what the water does to people!" Everhart-Skeels says, her voice nearly drowned out by the singing. "There's just something about the water that makes us all feel more powerful and alive."

For more information, visit sailtoprevail.org and clagettregatta.org.