

SAIL TO PREVAIL

BY ASHLEY BENDIKSEN PHOTOS PROVIDED BY SAIL TO PREVAIL



Newport is renowned worldwide as a premier destination for sailing. Both residents and visitors, sailors or not, have all stopped to admire the craft. At Sail To Prevail, the sport also becomes an equalizer - a place where persons of all abilities can work together, develop life-changing skills, and experience the beauty and grandeur of sailing the seas.

Founded in 1982, Sail To Prevail was the first established sailing program for individuals with disabilities in the United States. In 1996, when the organization was in need of leadership, Paul Callahan took the helm as Executive Director.

"We started with eight children and now we're serving between 1,000 and 1,500 per summer, and that's everything from pediatric cancer to children on the spectrum of autism and intellectually challenged people," Callahan says.

Nearly three decades later, Callahan says the key to the organization's success has been employing for-profit principles within the nonprofit environment.

This includes an emphasis on tracking measurable outcomes - how its programs benefit individuals physically, emotionally, psychologically, and intangibly in their everyday lives.

Through sailing as a unique outlet, participants of all abilities develop leadership skills, learn teamwork, and build self-confidence. Their fleet of sailboats is specially-adapted, ensuring that anyone with physical or intellectual limitations can easily operate the boat. For example, control lines are brought directly to the cockpit while seating

is designed to be up close to the tiller which drives the boat.

"Everything has to be done extremely safe, so there's a lot of responsibility to take these children out into Newport Harbor and Narragansett Bay," Callahan adds. "The boats that we have can really accommodate ease and use for almost any disability for anyone who has minimal function on up to nearly fully functioning," Callahan says.

The fleet, by the way, is named Independence. "For most of these participants, this is one of the first times in their lives when they can feel independence. They can get on the boat, leave the dock, and be in control of their own destiny, where they are unable to do that on a soccer field or a basketball court. That's where sailing lends itself to the feeling of freedom of rejuvenation," Callahan says.

This intangible impact is something Callahan sees on a regular basis. Participants believe in themselves. They're able to achieve new goals. They perform better in school or face less challenges with routine life tasks.

"Whatever limits they think they have, we try to go beyond that with them. It's different with every child, so it takes a lot of individual concentration on each child's possibilities of what occurs in their life. We try to have each person find their human potential," Callahan says.

Initially, families and participants reach out with varying goals. Some want the challenge of battling the wind and

pushing themselves to the limit, while others want to relax and escape the rigors of daily life. Whatever the reason, 94% report having an easier time in their daily lives since having attended Sail to Prevail, and seek to return.

"When they first arrive, they are often nervous and perhaps a little scared, but they return to the dock with the biggest grin and smile on their face. Their eyes are dancing and they can't wait to come back again," says Callahan.

Families are impacted as a result too. "It morphs over into being able to have a more fulfilling family experience, to participate more fully in family activities. It's a very heartwarming underlying mission to contribute to bettering the family unit, because in that they all can derive strength," says Callahan.

This is invaluable for those caring for a child with a disability, says Callahan. "They have to adjust almost everything in their life - from housing to transportation, schooling, and daily personal needs. There's also an enormous amount of care, and oftentimes it's a financial burden. In any way that our program can chip away at that is very important to us."

Callahan personally has experienced the healing benefits of sailing himself. "It was my junior year in college. I slipped on a wet floor and, in an instant, changed my life. I went from a fully functioning able-bodied person to a quadriplegic. I could not move anything for more than six months in a bed, and never knew that I would move again," he says.

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Sail to Prevail Executive Director Paul Callahan



Wheelchairs are left on the dock



A young boy steering during a sailing session

Yet, despite the odds, Callahan went on to compete in two Paralympic games, earning a Gold medal for Team USA in 2012.

"I was brought into the sport by someone I'd met on the docks while vacationing in Newport. This gentleman asked me if I wanted to go sailing, so I took up his offer, and jumped on the boat. I remember sailing away on the dock, and driving the boat as I was looking back at my wheelchair with no one in it, and finding it the most liberating feeling in the world," says Callahan.

"I still feel it this day," he adds, "and I feel it in a different way as I watch these thousand other children with disabilities experience the same thing every day here at Fort Adams. It's endless how many people you can help and the depths at which you can help them move toward their goals. I'm fortunate to be in a position where I can help be a catalyst to help improve the lives of other people, and that's the most meaningful gift that anyone could ever have," he says.

Like him, Callahan says you learn to overcome each challenge one at a time. Sailing accelerates the process of physical and psychological strength building. It demonstrates to you that no mountain is too tall and there's nothing too complex that you can't solve.

Presently, most of the organization's participants come from lower socio-economic backgrounds. With a mission

to serve as many individuals as possible, extensive effort goes into fundraising to provide scholarships so that all can participate.

"We used to serve both Paralympic sailors and individuals who came from lower socio-economic backgrounds. We got to a point where we felt we could not serve both bases, and we chose the latter. We felt that while both missions were fulfilling, there was more opportunity to make an impact on the world with this path. It's turned out to be 110% correct," Callahan says.

In addition, the organization supports two other unique demographics - pediatric cancer patients and veterans. Both came from simply identifying a need and an opportunity. On a visit to Hasbro Children's Hospital, Callahan noticed a disconnect between doctor, patient, and family. Now, in partnership with the hospital, all parties come together, working side by side, to sail.

The organization also brings together 50-100 veterans several times throughout each year. It's become a place for camaraderie, as well as a chance to help alleviate any PTSD, pain, or lingering struggles veterans may have picked up in service.

Additionally, the organization has established a partnership with Harvard University, pairing the sailing team with certified instructors to offer replica

programming on the Charles River in Cambridge. The big vision is to equip locations far and wide to provide sailing as a resource to those with disabilities.

Naturally, the undertaking requires a team effort. "We have an extraordinary staff and board of directors. Everyone in the organization is fully committed to improving peoples' lives one at a time," he says.

Sail To Prevail also serves the island as a whole. "For both people with disabilities as well as able-bodied people who witness our program, it's a very warm and positive experience that contributes to the great quality of life we have here in Newport. It's an opportunity for people with disabilities and their families to feel good about themselves, and therefore be happier and hopefully more productive within the areas of town in which they reside," Callahan says.

And for that reason, Callahan invites the community to visit their site on Fort Adams and see the program in action. "It's very emotional, and it also has a ripple effect. People realize that they perhaps have more potential in their own lives after watching our participants get on the boat and steer away from the deck," he says. "It's more than just a sailboat. You have a home here, and that's what we are all about."

To learn more or get involved visit www.sailtoprevail.org

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