

RACING

Pandemic Perseverance

Not to be deterred from getting out on the racecourse, the clubs and regattas adapted to shifting COVID-19 restrictions to get sailors on the water safely.

By Marty Siederer

One year ago, Paul Callahan, chief executive officer of [Sail To Prevail](#), was preparing the organization's modified Catalina 20s and ramping up operations for a typical summer of providing access to more than 1,000 individuals with disabilities. As a former investment banker, Callahan's radar was already tuned into global news, so the updates in February about rising COVID-19 cases in Asia and Europe concerned him enough to start preparing backup plans for Sail To Prevail's summer 2020 programs.

"We normally start prepping our boats in March, with a goal of getting them in the water at the end of April for a May 15 start date," said Callahan. With his two full-time staff members, he spent the initial days during Rhode Island's initial shutdown reaching out to supporters. "We sent handwritten notes to 906 supporters in March to ask how they were doing," says Callahan. "In deference to what everyone was going through with COVID, we felt that asking for donations at that time was not appropriate. Surprisingly, we received a number of unsolicited donations. That was really heartwarming."

Next was trying to prepare for their summer sailing program, not knowing when restrictions would be relaxed or what guidelines the organization would have to follow. "We would prepare internally for an opening date and protocols, but as COVID-19 got to be more of an

issue, the goalposts and timelines kept getting changed and moved further out," Callahan says. "At the same time, we normally bring on sailing instructors in mid-May and felt an obligation to pay them even if we couldn't take people out on the water."

Callahan decided to bring instructors onboard in mid-May, with plans to start sailing at the end of that month. COVID-19 restrictions were relaxed around that time and Sail To Prevail was able to take more than 600 participants on the water this past summer, fewer than prior years due to social distancing requirements. "The lower number actually ended up being somewhat of a blessing, since it meant we could spend more one-on-one time with each participant," Callahan says. "We felt a huge social responsibility to provide a safe and much-needed experience for the population we serve."

In hindsight, Callahan says, 2020 was his most gratifying year leading Sail To Prevail. "To provide people with an opportunity to leave their worries about COVID-19 back on the dock—if only for a couple of hours—made this past year one of the most gratifying for me and the staff. "Disabled kids' lives are already limited and the virus made it even more so. Giving them the opportunity to be on the water last summer resulted in a paradoxically successful season."