

Nonprofit sailing school weathers challenges to stay afloat

| October 03, 2019

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You might have seen the sails of boats from Learn to Sail from the U.S. 41 bridges. COURTESY PHOTO

If you have ever looked to the west from the U.S. 41 bridges over the Peace River and have seen the colorful sails of a fleet of tiny sailboats, you just might have witnessed one of the classes in progress taught by Learn to Sail.

The not-for-profit organization seeks to be a community hub where people can come to learn to sail and to be involved in sailing and other watersports that promote outdoor activity, health and well-being in general. Learn to Sail's vision is to provide access to sailing and sailing support roles for people of all ages in Charlotte County, as well as to support local schools in water safety education and provide volunteers to facilitate training and safety patrols.

While that sounds like a noble course to chart, it has not been smooth sailing.

From an acute reliance on volunteers and a constant struggle for revenue, to a tenuous lease on an aging building, Learn to Sail faces a challenging set of circumstances. As the sailing school makes way towards the future, it faces much more than fair winds and calm seas.



Students learn basic sailing skills and safety at Learn to Sail. COURTESY PHOTO

Learn to Sail was founded in 2014 by a like-minded group of sailors who wished to provide the community with a pathway for people of all ages to sail and develop skills on the water, without cost being a barrier.

The nonprofit 501(c)(3) structure of the organization allows it to operate tax free, as well as accept charitable donations, the value of which are tax-deductible for donors. Much of Learn to Sail’s operating revenue is generated through the rehabilitation and sale of donated vessels, trailers and related items.

Because no one — from the officers and board of directors to the safety crews and sailing instructors — is paid, classes are offered at the bare minimum required to keep the organization afloat.

“Learn to Sail has charitable intent,” said the organization’s president, Julie Jackson, “which means we offer sailing and other water-based activities at a cost that is realistic for families, enabling anyone to participate if

they desire. We're the most reasonably priced around because we're a nonprofit. We try to keep the prices very low, and the money that we charge is basically just to keeping the organization running.”



Above: Life vests are a must. Right: Volunteers teach students the ropes of sailing.

Like many clubs, benevolent organizations and mutual-interest societies, Learn to Sail relies heavily — or, in this case, entirely — on volunteers to achieve their vision and mission.

All hands-on deck

“That’s a screwy kind of problem to have, but the demand for volunteers down here is so great,” said former president and founding member David Blair.

Ms. Jackson is pragmatic about the situation.

“At all levels of the club, the bulk of the workload falls on the shoulders of a few people,” she explained. “Ours is a common issue with many volunteer organizations, and we recognize this as a vulnerability.”

“It’s very easy to get volunteers — I mean good volunteers,” Mr. Blair added. “It’s very difficult to get them to move into a leadership position. It took two years to get Julie in that place. And she may not be a sailor, but she’s an administrator.”



In what Ms. Jackson describes as her “former life,” she worked as an international project manager for Oracle. To say she is an administrator is likely a gross understatement. She approaches her team-building role at Learn to Sail in much the same way she approached her projects in the business world.

“Everybody is important,” Ms. Jackson said. “Everybody has a gift that I believe they bring to the organization, an experience — life experience. And rather than try to force them into a particular path, we use that, and allow them to have a budget and run with it. I think giving them some control and letting them do what makes them happy is the secret to keeping them.”

Volunteers at Learn to Sail develop the classroom and sailing curriculum, deliver classroom instruction, launch, recover and stow the sailboat fleet by hand, supervise and coach the sailing activities, man the safety boats, maintain the fleet, repair and resell boat and trailer donations, and maintain the building and grounds.



Learn to Sail offers classes for adults and children. COURTESY PHOTO

The work is physically and mentally demanding, and the outdoor environment is one of blazing sun, sweltering heat, smothering humidity and sudden storms. But that doesn't hinder the volunteers.

All volunteers must pass background checks and a boating safety course. Any volunteers who work with children also are required to complete the Olympic SafeSport Program. The U.S. Center for SafeSport is committed to ending all forms of abuse in sport, including physical and emotional abuse, bullying, harassment, hazing and sexual misconduct. Each of the six sailing instructors at Learn to Sail are U.S. Sailing certified.

“It’s not that we don’t want just anyone to come and help,” Ms. Jackson said, “but if they’re going to help, we have to make sure if they’re around these kids that we don’t have any worries.”

In the **KNOW**

Learn to Sail

- >> **Where:** 750 W. Retta Esplanade,
Punta Gorda
- >> **Info:** For more about boat donations,
making financial contributions,
volunteer applications or class
schedules, visit www.learntosailswf.org
or call 941-999-1102.

“Our volunteers really are amazing,” she added. “We work our tails off out there, and it’s hot and it’s hard work. But we laugh, and we have fun.”

Sailors in training

The strict regimen does not end with the volunteers. Learn to Sail has detailed procedures in place for students as well. Safety is taught before any sailing activities commence. All sailors must pass a swimming test, and lifejackets are mandatory. The two safety boats are deployed before the first sailboat is launched each day, and a watchful eye is always kept on the weather. The safety boats, purchased through a grant provided by the Charlotte County Marine Advisory Committee, are outboard-equipped inflatable boats capable of quickly reaching a capsized sailboat. They have rounded sides for hauling up a man overboard, ladders for unassisted boarding and can tow multiple sailboats in the event of a weather emergency.

“If those were our (own) kids out there,” Ms. Jackson posited, “what would we want done?”

Introductory youth sailing classes at Learn to Sail are divided into age groups by school year: elementary, middle and high school. Intermediate classes are available to all age groups. Adult classes were established in the fall of 2018 and will be offered for a second time beginning in October. The most popular Learn to Sail classes are the summer youth classes because they run like a mini camp on five consecutive days. Adult classes will take place on consecutive Saturdays.

Students of all ages learn the basics of sailing in a classroom setting and through hands-on experience on the water. The classroom education consists of learning the anatomy of a sailboat and nautical terminology, how to rig and unrig a vessel, maritime navigation rules, basic knots and other useful information. On the river, using the school’s fleet of dinghies — Sunfish, Pico Lasers and Americans — student sailors learn about how to hoist sails, coil and hang lines, take the helm and crew on a sailing vessel and sail a course in various wind conditions. They also learn how to lower, fold and stow sails, recover a man overboard and drop anchor.

Sailing is a physical sport that promotes health and well being. But perhaps more so than many other sports, it requires the development of intellectual skills. Sailors require knowledge not only of their boat and its equipment but also meteorological knowledge and how to be responsible for themselves and others while afloat. Watersports also help to foster awareness and responsibility for marine ecology and wildlife and the environment.

Despite all the generosity of the Learn to Sail volunteers — and despite the organization running as lean as possible — it's not always smooth sailing.

A house is not a home

Boat insurance, maintenance on the boats and advertising are all very expensive. Learn to Sail accepts donations of boats in fair condition, and volunteers refurbish and resell them, using local suppliers and vendors whenever possible.

“Those boat donations that we fix — and either use or sell — are really the only additional funds that we get,” Ms. Jackson lamented.

Sailing has long been referred to as a sport for the rich. Through its charitable efforts, Learn to Sail is doing its best to provide an attainable means of learning to sail for all members of the community, regardless of their income. But if sailing is not cheap, neither is inhabiting waterfront property in Southwest Florida. You can tack rent right up there among the costliest of the organization's expenditures and among the chief causes of anxiety for the group's leadership.

The school's physical location inside the Bayfront Center, 750 W. Retta Esplanade, is leased from the city of Punta Gorda by the YMCA. Though the YMCA holds daily exercise classes at the location — and subleases space to several organizations including the Boy Scouts and the Bayfront Dancers, a group of seniors who meet twice per week to dance and socialize — a perception exists among some voters that the building, or perhaps the land, is not living up to its potential.

“The presumption put forth is that it's just an idle building which has been underutilized,” said Punta Gorda City Councilman Jaha Cummings. “The reality is, people are using it.”

This lack of public profile is not lost on Ms. Jackson.

“It's amazing that we've been here now for five, almost six, years and a lot of people have never heard of us,” she said. “So that's why we're really targeting and trying to get the community to know us.”

Walk in through the front door, and the first thing you see are rows of differently colored life jackets hanging on racks on the right-hand wall. To the left is a communal kitchen with bare concrete floors, naked walls, dated cabinets and all the charm of a college fraternity house. To the right of the door is Learn to Sail's combined classroom and indoor storage space. Just inside from the hallway is a desk and computer for the administrators. Rows of tables form the classroom facing a whiteboard on the far wall. On the north wall are piles of carefully laid masts and stowed sails. Ropes hang neatly from pegs on the wall. The room resembles some sort of adventure lodge, or a clichéd set from a summer camp movie. It smells like old canvas and rope that has been exposed to time, sun and air, and cycled from wet to dry and back again hundreds of times.

“Our biggest concern that we have at Learn to Sail right now is this building,” Ms. Jackson said. “We don't know what's going to happen to it. This is the city's building. The YMCA leases it and we sublease it from the Y.”

A plan for all seasons

Like many of the other tenants in the building, Learn to Sail uses the facility on a year-round basis.

In addition to spring and summer classes for youth, “This fall we’re going to have after-school sailing and then the adult sailing,” Ms. Jackson said. “So we’re using the facility all year long. And, you know, those boats are meant to be used. Sitting in those racks doesn’t do anybody any good.

“We’re working on a five-year strategic plan — and we’re doing it with the assumption that the city is going to continue to support us and that we will be able to stay in this location. But those are just assumptions. We have no evidence that that’s going to happen.”

For his part, Councilman Cummings did his best to provide some reassurance.

“The city has no plans or no means to do anything with that building right now,” he said.

He went on to explain that it isn’t merely the use of the building that is at issue.

“The building, as is, is one of those buildings that preceded our new code. So any changes to it that exceed 50% of its value would require us to match the new building code — which means that it would have to be torn down. And you’re looking at multimillion dollars to fix it.”

This is not lost on Ms. Jackson. She and the volunteers have gone to extraordinary lengths to preserve their investment in the building.

“All the improvements that we’re making can be moved if we have to move,” she said. “Our biggest concern is where we would go, because there are certain requirements you have with something like this. And we have looked and looked, and there is no place around.”

Most of these concerns seem to be no cause for alarm at the moment.

Many in the community are thinking about fundraising to improve the building while still staying below that 50% threshold, according to Councilman Cummings, “so that there’s no justifiable reason to actually make a new building,” he said.

“We try to keep as many sails on the water as possible,” Ms. Jackson stressed, “but we need support from the community.”

All of that should provide a breakwater in the minds of the sailors at Learn to Sail. For the foreseeable future, Learn to Sail will continue to provide a valuable service to, and opportunity for, the Charlotte Harbor community.

“I came down here one day and was asked if I could help, and that was it, I was hooked,” Ms. Jackson said. “These kids, they’re always in front of their electronics. (When) they get here on Monday, they’re always very unsure of themselves; they’re a little hesitant. By the end of the week, they are different children. Their confidence level is up. They get out there on their own boat, those winds fill their sail and they realize, for once in their lives, they’re in control, and their whole attitude changes.

“So it’s really been a neat thing to see.” |