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Girls at the helm

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Dawn Santamaria knows about teenage girls. She should, having four daughters of her own.

And she's using that knowledge in her Sisters Under Sail program, in which teenage girls can sign on to crew the tall ship Unicorn. The ship will pull into Bay City for the Tall Ship Celebration: Bay City festival from July 20-23.



When the Unicorn, based in New Jersey, leaves port on July 24, Santamaria would like to take five young women from the Bay City area with her for a four-day stint aboard the ship. There are six spots in all, and one has been filled by a teen from Ann Arbor.

"Our program is so unique and interesting because of its tie-in to just teenage girls," Santamaria said.

The Sisters Under Sail program costs \$800, with the Bay City leg of the journey landing in Green Bay, Wis. Teens must arrange for their own way home from Green Bay.

While on the Unicorn, the girls will stand watch, set sails and navigate a course while they learn what it takes to operate and maintain the 118-foot, 150-ton steel vessel.

They'll also keep a daily journal and learn how to connect their seafaring experience with their teenage life on land.

All activities are geared toward building confidence and self-esteem in young women.

Santamaria, 46, is co-owner and CEO of True North of Clinton, the New Jersey-based company that owns the Unicorn. She and her husband purchased the ship in 1999, soon finding out that running a ship is an expensive business. They knew they had to develop some strong programs in order to keep the ship afloat, she said.

But it was her own daughters, now ages 8, 15, 20 and 21, that inadvertently led the way.

"I've got a lot of experience with teenage girls, but more importantly, I saw my own daughters struggle with trying to find their own way."

She saw how they took to the ship and its challenges right away, prompting her to develop an in-depth program just for girls, she said.

In the program, young women are freer to take on leadership roles as there are no boys around to intimidate them. There are also no flirtations, she said.

"You see them transform before your very eyes," Santamaria said. "They're able to step up to the plate."

As a result, she said, they come away with a higher level of determination and character that they can then use to navigate life.

Parallels are drawn from activities teens will participate in while on board to real life, such as taking the helm - steering the ship.

"It's such a beautiful metaphor for taking the wheel of their own life," Santamaria said.

The riskiest activity they will attempt while on board is 'climbing the shrouds,' the ladders that climb 60 feet above the water on either side of the ship's mast. The exercise gets the girls comfortable with taking risks, Santamaria said.

"Young girls, they take to it like ducks to water. They really like the challenge."

And the more they do it, the more confident they become overall - and it's a confidence that spills over onto other areas of their lives, she said.

Learning to tie knots is another skill the girls will learn. Tying knots is a tedious process and may seem boring, like life, Santamaria said. But practicing those knots while the seas are calm will give them the expertise to tie them during a squall, she said.

The same could apply to their lives, she said, in how they deal with academics, peer pressure, or any of the many challenges teenagers must meet.

The onboard experience also encourages the girls to become participants in their communities once they get home.

"On a ship that's a must - taking care of fellow crew members in every sense of the word," Santamaria said.

For more information on the Sisters Under Sail program, visit www.tallshipunicorn.com; e-mail Santamaria at dawn@tallshipunicorn.com; or call 908-713-1808.

