



Girls find horizon limitless on ship

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Dressed in her electric-blue rain slicker, 14-year-old Lakesha watched yesterday, her face frozen with fright, as a crew member for the Tall Ship Unicorn demonstrated how to "go aloft," climbing the masts of the 118-foot topsail schooner docked at the Perth Amboy marina.

The Sayreville teenager agreed to put on the safety harness and give it a try, despite her fears.

"It was cool," she said smiling after she came back down. "It was kind of scary. I feel good that I overcame my fear. I'm proud of myself. At least I got on it."

Lakesha was one of 23 teenage girls who participated in the first "Ramona's Sail," the brainchild of Dawn Santamaria, who, along with her husband, Jay, owns the ship and uses it for their business, running executive training exercises.

The Santamarias and Quality Concrete, a Perth Amboy-based business, sponsored the trip, which was free of charge to the girls, who ranged in age from 12 to 16. It is a spinoff of a weeklong sail-training voyage for girls held aboard the ship during the summers.

"I want the girls to think that there is more out there for them," Santamaria said. "They might not think about college, but I want them to broaden their perspective, to see that they can do anything they dream of."

She said the program also shows the girls how to work as a team to get jobs done -- such as raising the sails so the ship could glide over the Raritan River without the use of its large engines or guiding it around other vessels.

Santamaria said she is forming a nonprofit foundation to sponsor programs for young girls, to help them build self-esteem. She plans to name it "Sisters Under Sail."

The girls were recruited from church groups, Perth Amboy's summer camps and programs and the Girl Scouts with the help of Mayor Joseph Vas's staff. Yesterday's program was named for Vas's mother, who died several years ago. Although most of the girls came from Perth Amboy, others came from Bridgewater, Sayreville, Edison and Carteret. There also was one visitor from St. Thomas.

The girls spent an hour at the Perth Amboy Marina dock, learning how to do the various jobs required to sail and the language associated with sailing. After the lesson, the ship sailed first toward the Outerbridge Crossing, then turned around and headed into Raritan Bay, passing barges and tankers as they made their way past Perth Amboy and into the Arthur Kill.

The girls learned how to make different knots, how to use a compass and how to arrange the ropes needed to control the different sails.

"I wanted to experience taking control of a boat, steering it," Cynthia Santiago, 14, of Carteret said after she came down from climbing the masts. "I was brave. I'm not scared of anything. It was pretty exciting."

Nicole Mazza, 13, of Bridgewater, also was frightened of the climb up the masts, but she agreed to try and made it more than halfway up.

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"I was afraid I was going to fall in the water," Mazza said. "Now, I had my thrill for the summer."

Dawn Santamaria, whose daughter, Chelsea, taught the girls to climb, said "going aloft" is "the most risk-oriented activity onboard they participate in."

"The top of my masts are 96 feet from the water line," Santamaria said. "The girls only have to climb as far as they are comfortable."

Lauren Gibson Fleming, 14, didn't do it at all.

"I can't swim unless I'm on a beach," said the teenager, who lives on St. Thomas in the United States Virgin Islands, but is visiting her godmother in Sayreville. "I wanted to get the experience of being on a ship. All we have are ferries."

Schane Flowers, 13, of Perth Amboy decided not to climb because "I'm afraid I'll go into the water and I don't know how to swim."

But, she said her fear won't deter her from considering a life at sea.

"I want to be a good leader and sail a boat," Flowers, a student at the McGinnis School, said. "I'm thinking of becoming a sailor. I know I have to learn how to swim. I'll do that. I want to learn how to navigate so I can take a trip, maybe around the world."

The Santamarias, who live in Hunterdon County, bought the Unicorn in 1999 and were porting the ship in Halifax, Nova Scotia, Canada, but they were looking to move it closer to home. The ship's crew members are all Canadian citizens.

The ship visited Perth Amboy during the U.S. Sailing 2004 Championships Regatta, hosted by the Raritan Bay Yacht Club, in October. While the ship was moored in Perth Amboy, city officials approached Dawn Santamaria and her husband about making Perth Amboy its home port.

The Santamarias hire the ship for executive retreats, and offer day sails out of Perth Amboy on Saturdays. They also offer deck tours (for a small admission fee) on Sundays.

After the worst of the hurricane season is over in early November, the Santamarias plan to sail the ship to its winter port in Fort Pierce, Fla., where they will continue to use it for business.

