

CHICAGO SUN-TIMES

'Leadership Sails' put women in ship-shape

August 4, 2006

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Of all the sailing vessels at the Tall Ships Festival, the Tallship Unicorn has the most "girl power." An all-woman crew sailed her in yesterday from Green Bay, Wis., with a half-dozen women executives on board for leadership training. It leaves here next Saturday for Port Huron, Mich., with a group of teenage girls on a journey of self-awareness and character-building. And each day it's here, professional women -- five at a time -- set sail at sunrise on skill-building "leadership sails." Dawn Santamaria, the ship's captain and chief financial officer, created the niche, combining professional development for executive women with a cause dear to her heart, empowering girls. The executive course is called "Chart Your Course." The program for girls is "Sisters Under Sail." "I have a total of six girls on board as crew, two are my daughters," said Santamaria. "We practice what we teach." Most tall ships are owned by foundations or corporations. This one is owned by a family. Santamaria and her husband, Jay, president and chief executive officer of Manhattan-based Beam Pines, Inc., a human resources consulting firm, bought the boat in 1999, "the fulfillment of a dream he had to own a tall ship," she said. The ship acts as a learning laboratory for Beam Pines.



Executive women pay \$2,900 for the shipboard experience. With assessment and a six-month executive coaching component, the entire cost can run up to \$25,000. It's an investment in their career, they say.

"I have huge career aspirations," said Ann Wallin, director of internal audit for the Hub Group in Downer's Grove. "It can only help me grow. To get to the next step requires self-growth as well as growing technically. You have to grow personally and professionally as well."

Wallin, 32, said the shipboard experience will round out six months of executive coaching she's just completed. Even before setting sail, she clearly understood the nautical metaphor.

"I play a different role every single day," she said. "One day I'm captain of the ship and the next day I'm the person swabbing the deck. I think this a perfect opportunity to see people switching roles, working with people with different experience and agendas, all trying to get to the same place."

Initially, her love of sailing drew Sue Mangel to the Unicorn. Mangel, who handles the gift side of her family's famous Drake Hotel florist shop, said at first she was wary of being analyzed as a candidate for executive development. She set professional development goals of "becoming more disciplined, planning things a little better, on the whole getting along with people better, knowing myself better and how I can progress in my field."

"I think I will learn a lot on the water," Mangel said. "I think it will be a very nourishing experience. I'm looking forward to it."

Neither Wallin nor Mangel have sailing experience.

"Most women don't know much about boating, and if they do, most have never been on a tall ship before. What makes them so unique to their male counterparts is they are awestruck by the size of vessel, the miles of lines of rope and rigging and they completely surrender to the experience," Santamaria said. "Because they surrender their learning is greater."



Dawn Santamaria, a graduate of all-girl St. Mary's College at Notre Dame and the mother of four daughters, said adding the program for girls was something "my life just led me to."

"Unfortunately, we don't have enough places where these girls can come together in a totally uninhibited environment, with no boys around, where they can assume leadership roles and have an opportunity to blossom. We put them on a watch schedule, they take the wheel, set sails together, wash the decks, learn to navigate -- everything my crew does, they work alongside them."

Through journaling and activities, girls connect their shipboard experience to life: setting a course to reach a destination, and navigating around different obstacles. Female crew members share their own experiences about leadership and teamwork. "Sisters Under Sail" trips are three to five days and cost about \$200 a day.

The Unicorn was at Chicago's Tall Ships Festival in 2003. After that, she was drydocked, gutted down to her steel ribs and refit with three luxury guest cabins and a master stateroom. Built in 1947, Unicorn's metal hull used recycled materials from captured German U-boats. She was a fishing boat for 32 years, later converted to a sailing ship. The brother of Muppets creator Jim Henson, Morris Henson, owned it for five years, sailing the West Indies, Caribbean and Spanish coast.

The Unicorn's home base now is Long Island Sound. She takes part in tallship events on the Great Lakes and the Atlantic coast.

While the ship is in Chicago, it will set out on five leadership sails, mini-versions of "Chart Your Course," with 12 professional women on each trip. The guest list includes lawyers, college professors, nurses, a teacher, women in finance and corporate execs, with a Beam Pines facilitator.

"I haven't been in an all-women situation since St. Mary's," said Wallin, a 1992 grad. "It was very empowering. Every day I work with male executives. I have females in management positions here, but my board of directors I work directly for is all male. Sometimes it's nice to work with a female team."

Access to the tall ships is today through next Wednesday, 11 a.m. to 8 p.m. Moored on the Chicago River between Wabash Avenue and Lake Shore Drive, they will paint a picture of the Chicago lakefront of the 1800s. Access to the festival area is free. Wristbands must be purchased to board the vessels at \$12 on site. Children under 3 and card-carrying military personnel are free.

