

August 25, 2006

Pointe teens grow 5 days aboard ship

Three Grosse Pointe 14-year-old girls find life on the tallship Unicorn a fun and challenging learning experience — especially at 4 a.m. in a squall with the motor out.

By JOHN MINNIS

08/24/2006 - Five days before the mast — not as long as author Richard Henry Dana Jr.'s "Two Years Before the Mast," but it was just as memorable for three 14-year-old Grosse Pointe girls.

Beatrice Tepel of the Farms and Katie LeVan and Alexis Stupanek of the Park got the adventure of a lifetime when they sailed a "tallship" recently from Chicago to Port Huron. They boarded Saturday, Aug. 12, and disembarked Thursday, Aug. 17.

During the five days, they learned teamwork and to conquer fears. Their voyage was part of the Sisters Under Sail program founded by Dawn Santamaria of New Jersey.

Santamaria, 46, hosts the Sisters Under Sail program for young women, ages 13 to 20, aboard the STV (Student Training Vessel) Unicorn. She and her husband, Jay, owner of a Manhattan human resources firm, purchased the topsail schooner in 1999.

"It was my husband's longtime dream to own a tallship," Santamaria says.

Now as executive officer, Santamaria spends more time aboard the Unicorn than her husband.

After a bow-to-stern refit down to its steel ribs, the boat is now used for corporate training and development, including a women's executive program, called Chart Your Course.

As a mother of four daughters, it was a natural for Santamaria to include younger women and teenage girls in the Unicorn's programs.

The Unicorn was built in 1947 as a fishing trawler. Its hull was fabricated from U-boats captured during World War II. The ship, originally named Eenhorn — Dutch for Unicorn — fished the North Atlantic for 32 years before being converted to a sailing vessel in 1979.

The 118-foot, 20-foot-beam topsail schooner went through several owners before it found a home with the Santamarias. It now sails out of Perth Amboy, N.J.

The Unicorn has been completely modernized with redundant electronics. It features four guest cabins, all with heads, showers and air conditioning.

"It is really nice," LeVan said of the accommodations. "I was surprised. We each had our own bed and a head."

Santamaria is a working owner. She manages the shipboard business (along with a professional captain and crew) and likes to help out in the galley.



Grosse Pointe 14-year-olds, from left, Alexis Stupanek, Katie LeVan and Beatrice Tepel spent five days aboard the tallship STV Unicorn as part of the Sisters Under Sail program. They sailed from Chicago to Port Huron and encountered some adventures and learning experiences along the way.

"I cook on board. I like to cook," she said.

She must be good.

"The food was really good," LeVan said. "I was surprised how good it could be on a sailing boat like this."

Santamaria said the shipboard, all-girl setting is ideal for the teenagers to learn leadership and teamwork skills.

"There are no little boys to take the leadership roles away from them," she said.

The girls learn responsibility and working together. They also learn how to set course and sails and climb the rigging leading to the 96-foot mast.

"All girls climb the rigging. I don't coddle the girls," Santamaria said. "It is about how they face new challenges. Hopefully, it will instill values while they are young. Each girl has a pivotal moment during the voyage. It's like a light bulb going off. You see she's a different person."

That pivotal moment for Tepel, LeVan and Stupanek came at 4 a.m. 20 miles west of Mackinac when a squall popped up and the Unicorn's powerful diesel engine wouldn't start.

"It was scary," Tepel said. "I had night shift. I helped get all the sails down."

LeVan said it was "a little frightening, but it was fun."

The girls enjoyed a day on Mackinac Island while the ship's engine was being repaired.

The Grosse Pointe parents learned about the Unicorn and Sisters Under Sail program through the Grosse Pointe Academy's Action Auction, where a sailing adventure from Port Huron to the Detroit Yacht Club was included as one of the auction items.

The parents of Tepel, LeVan and Stupanek wanted their daughters to benefit from the Sisters Under Sail program, so they purchased the berths out of Chicago. Tepel and LeVan are best friends.

"It was a lot of fun," Tepel said. "I really learned how to use teamwork to get things done. We needed to help each other to get the sails up and down. Thing like that."

"I really liked it," said LeVan. "It thought it was a great experience, and it was really fun. I sail with Beatrice, but I've never sailed a big boat like that before. It was really a cool experience. I would do it again."

A veteran sailor of eight or nine years, Stupanek was really impressed with the tallship experience.

"It was amazing," she said. "I was kind of tentative at first. But we really worked together. I like standing watch and steering the boat."

She said it was at the end of her shift when "a little storm rolled in," she said, matter-of-factly. "We lost our engine when water got in."

"I would definitely do it again."

"They may not have profound, life-changing experiences," Santamaria says of those taking part in the Sisters Under Sail program, "but they have stretched themselves beyond what they thought possible."

Information on the STV Unicorn and its program may be found at tallshipunicorn.com.

John Minnis is the editor of the Grosse Pointe News.



Dawn Santamaria, co-owner of the tallship, STV Unicorn, enjoys working in the galley. She recently cooked for three Grosse Pointe girls aboard for the Sisters Under Sail program. Photo by John Minnis