

Tall Ships

By Meg Dedolph *business editor*



On the tall ship Unicorn, work isn't always what it seems.

The ship looks like it sailed right out of a pirate movie, even though it was built in 1947. The Unicorn is a training vessel that takes adults and teens on trips to learn leadership skills and experience personal growth.

Raising the ship's heavy sails is a chance to think about teamwork. Keeping the ship on course with its big wooden wheel gives an opportunity to talk about the perils of snap judgments. Climbing the shrouds, which stretch from the deck to the top of one of the ship's two tall masts, is about facing challenges.

Dawn Santamaria, the ship's chief executive officer, and her crew were in Chicago for the city's Tall Ships Festival last week. The visit gave her a chance to work with the alumnae office of St. Mary's College, a women's school in Notre Dame, Ind., from which she graduated.

Santamaria offered three four-hour sunrise leadership sail programs for the college's alumnae. Participants worked with the crew and a facilitator to frame shipboard tasks in terms of daily living.

"We encourage you to do some activities you may not do in everyday life," said Gloria Bullman of BeamPines HR, the consultant and facilitator for the leadership programs. "We'll set the sails together, and you'll see it's something you can't do yourself. You'll take the helm, which has an obvious metaphor."

Heave-ho!

Life under sail involved a lot of heavy lifting.

"Ready port-side quarter lifts!" came the call, and, strong at first but faltering over the strange lingo, the women shouted back, "Ready port side."

Three women, including Naperville residents Patty Cushing and Kristin Newell, shouted in rhythm as they raised the mainsail, which crept up the 96-foot mast a few inches at a time.

Cushing, who works for the National Futures Association as associate director of compliance, felt like she was the only one pulling and that with three people working, the job should have been easier – even though everyone was sweating.

"It reminded me, everybody is pulling their weight, so stop being so quick to judge. You can think about it afterwards and debrief, but in the heat of the moment, just do what you need to do," she said.

Newell said she, too, wondered how long they'd be working to raise the sail and admitted that, like Cushing, she probably gave her teammates an exasperated look.

"I don't have much of a poker face, so I probably was," she said.

Up the shrouds

Cushing's first words upon looking at the shrouds were, "It's not going to happen."

The shrouds, heavy cables running from the deck to the top of one of the ship's two masts, have rungs like a ladder. To take the first three steps, where the rungs are farthest apart, the women had to step onto the edge of the ship as it gently rocked on Lake Michigan.

Chelsea Iverson, 20, of New Jersey, one of Santamaria's daughters, showed the women how to put on their safety harnesses and gave some tips on climbing.

“You want to keep three points of contact at all times – two hands and a foot or two feet and a hand. Only hold on to the stay that runs vertically, not the bars. And anything you don’t want to drop in the water, take it out of your pockets.”



She paused. “Maisie will go up ahead of you.”

“And dangle chocolate,” crew member Maisie McArthur, 22, of England, finished for her.

Some women didn’t need any enticements to climb.

Alison Spohn of Naperville had decided the day before, at a co-workers challenge, that she was going to climb to the top of the mast, which she did, waving for photos when she reached the top.

“My favorite part was at the beginning, when Gloria said if you weren’t interested in climbing, you should participate by encouraging others,” Spohn said. “I found that to be such a valuable lesson. I think it’s just as important to learn how to be a follower sometimes.”

As Cushing watched the other women take turns climbing and clapping for one another, she changed her mind.

“I’m going to climb,” she said. “But I’m going to do this a little later. I want to see other people do this first.”

Lessons learned

Afterward, her leg was shaking, but she was pleased.

“I’d be sad if this were over and I hadn’t done everything I could,” Cushing said. “But I couldn’t sit there and watch more people. I’d have chickened out.”

At the end of the four-hour sail, the women gathered on the deck with Bullman to talk about what they had done.

Spohn talked about raising the sails and how it made her think about being oblivious to others’ work while she was focused on her own.

“I looked up, and so much had happened because so many people were working,” she said. “You never realize how much more is being done, because 100 percent of your attention is being devoted to your task.”

Spohn, who works with commercial customers at First Bank, said she learned as much from the other women participating as she did from the day itself.

“Somebody had mentioned – I think it was Kristin – that somebody said, ‘Well, why would you go on a leadership cruise? You’re a stay-at-home-mom,’” Spohn said. “I was appalled to hear that, and I don’t have kids. How shortsighted. Leadership and teamwork – that’s all part of being a stay-at-home-mom, as well.”

For Santamaria, who grew up in Naperville, the leadership cruises are her favorite part of the sailing season.

“By having an all-women experience, you more readily bond,” she said. “Women tend to surrender to the process pretty quickly. They’re more inclined to say, ‘I’m overwhelmed. Teach me what I need to know.’ Four hours isn’t a long time to drive home some of these key points, but they get the metaphors we’re trying to share.”

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