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Heart of Sailing: Therapeutic program improves quality of life

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For parents with children suffering with debilitating diseases, it is often impossible to find safe, low cost recreational activities.

But a program offered in the Bayshore area offers a solution.

Heart of Sailing, according to Deer Park resident Donna Cariker, has been a Godsend for her and her son, Caleb, 19, a student in the La Porte ISD Special Education Department.

According to their Web site (www.heartofsailing.org), Heart of Sailing teaches sailing to special needs children as a form of recreational therapy. The charity was founded in 2004 by George Saidah, a successful software entrepreneur who was motivated by his personal experience with a loved one with a cognitive disorder. A sailor for more than 35 years, Saidah dreamed of combining his love of the ocean with service to the community. Since retiring in 2005, Saidah devotes his time to developing Heart of Sailing to create a fun, educational and therapeutic opportunity for children with developmental disabilities.

Cariker found the local chapter through her association with Recreational Therapist Yolanda Franklin.

Cariker explained Caleb's condition as a neurological disorder that began affecting him at 5-months-old when he began having constant seizures.

"It is a neurological disorder that completely devastated him by the age of 3," she said. "He lost everything."

But she said the Heart of Sailing program has helped him as much as any other program.

"I noticed changes in Caleb once we were on the boat and after we got off," Cariker said in an interview last week. "He has misfiring in his brain - little seizure activity going on all the time. But when he gets on the boat, we don't see any of that."

Locally, Captain Dave McCabe, Chapter Director of the Houston-Galveston Chapter since 2007, is a highly accomplished sailor who began his personal sailing journey more than 60 years ago and with his boat, The Blue Marlin VIII, joined Heart of Sailing.

"When I first started with heart of Sailing, I immediately noticed the benefits to the child," McCabe said. "What escaped me at the time was the benefit to the parent. To see the parents have the confidence in us to relinquish the child to our care and be able to sit back and relish in their child's therapy is really special."

Cariker agreed, explaining that the boat tours also serve as a respite for the parent.

"As a parent, it is such a celebration to be able to give my child something that I can't give him every day, like the wind blowing in his hair," she said. "To get him out on the boat and see the calming effect it has on him is one thing that really brings joy to my heart."

Although alternative forms of therapy such as art and music therapy, as well as horseback riding, have become widely accepted in the last few years, sailing is a unique environment for participants, according to the Web site.

Sailing encourages abstract thought and teamwork, develops problem-solving skills and ultimately helps one learn patience and self-respect. The experience of sailing is not limited to the physical, although for many participants, it is their first opportunity to enjoy the unique sensations associated with sailing: the feel of the wind, the movement of the waves, the sounds as the boat moves through the water, all of which are stimulating and exhilarating.

Heart of Sailing operates its Daysail Program in more than 10 locations worldwide. Daysails incorporate therapeutic principles, as described in the Sailing Therapy Benefits form. Depending upon location (i.e. inland lake or ocean), the Daysail commences at 9:30 a.m. Participants typically range in age from 8-18 (although exceptions are made), and must be accompanied by a parent or caregiver. Participants are fitted with U.S. Coast Guard approved lifejackets and board the sailboats for their introductory lessons on boating safety and sailing. Upon departing the dock, the children learn more about the parts and function of a sailboat and are encouraged to participate as crewmembers. While aboard, the children have the opportunity (based upon their abilities) to help hoist and trim the sails, learning the basics of how wind propels the sailboat.



Therapy on the Bay - Caleb Cariker (clockwise from bottom), Captain Dave McCabe, Recreational Therapist Yolanda Franklin and Donna Cariker enjoy a therapeutic sail recently on Galveston Bay.

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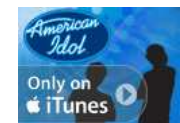
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Each child has the opportunity to take the helm and pilot the boat, which provides them with a greater understanding of the principles of sailing and basic navigation. Lunch is served picnic-style on the boat, and gives participants and important opportunity for social interaction. Daysails conclude with each child receiving a medal and commemorative certificate, along with photo opportunities, in recognition of their service as crewmembers.

McCabe pointed out that the sails are free and the entire family is invited to join.

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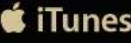
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