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KEEPING KIDS AFLOAT
Sailing programs help teens broaden their horizons
Benjamin Pimentel
Friday, July 7, 2000

The cold wind didn't bother Nai Tai as the 15-year-old sophomore stood at the helm of the 57-foot sailboat wearing only a T-shirt, baggy pants and black Nikes.

``Let go Line 2!'' the Richmond teen yelled, and at the sailboat's bow, Rosalinda Martinez, 16, pulled a rope off a wooden piling, as the Nehemiah glided slowly away from Marina Bay.

``Aye, aye!'' she answered.

That windy morning on the San Francisco Bay, Nai, Rosalinda and 13 other Richmond High School students were in charge of the 30-year-old sailboat in one of two East Bay programs that let low-income and at-risk youths experience the thrills of sailing.

``It's cool,'' Nai said. ``it's doing things by ourselves. Even though we're teenagers, we hoisted that main sail -- and we did it perfectly.''

The Nehemiah program began in 1997 when the sailboat's owners, Rod and Joni Phillips, teamed with the U.S. Coast Guard to teach Richmond High School students about navigation and sailing.

The Nehemiah takes as many as 300 youths a year, including 50 from Richmond High, Joni Phillips said. ``The objective is to broaden their view, to teach them responsibility,'' she said. ``It's good for them to go beyond concrete.''

In Berkeley, the Pegasus, a 51- foot sailboat, also takes area elementary and high school students sailing, while teaching them some basics of marine ecology. The program takes as many as 700 children a year, said Peter Hayes, co-director of the Nautilus Institute, a Berkeley think tank that owns Pegasus.

``There is a large unfulfilled need for kids who are growing up in the city to have access to the wilderness, and the closest available wilderness is the bay,'' Hayes said.

In Richmond, students spend hours in the classroom learning the basics of sailing, including safety procedures and how to plot a course. They then apply what they learned on two sailing trips.

``We stand next to them, but they do everything,'' Joni Phillips said, as she waited for the teenagers to arrive, wearing a bright yellow jacket, a cap and sneakers.

``The idea is to put them in charge,'' said Rod Phillips, who also works as a ferryboat captain for the Red and White Fleet.

Joni and Rod Phillips are experienced sailors, and with them on the sailing trips are three members of the U.S. Coast Guard ready to help the couple take charge in case something goes wrong.

``It's going to be very windy,'' bellowed Dan Johnston, a chief quartermaster with the Coast Guard. ``You are going to have to pay attention. If you're feeling dizzy, look out and stare at the horizon.''

Before they cast off, Johnston reviews safety procedures, including how to put on a life jacket in case the boat sinks.

Using a compass and charts, Coast Guard Quartermaster Ray Codd worked with navigators Fenesha Hill, 16, and Elizabeth Orozco, 15, who yells, ``Steer 180!``

And Nai, who lives with his parents and six siblings in Richmond, acknowledges the course setting and steers the Nehemiah toward the Richmond-San Rafael Bridge.

Ricardo Cintron, 16, of San Pablo, the son of a preschool teacher and a mechanic, was engineer that day, and it was his job to make sure that the engine didn't catch fire.

But the two-hour sail was also a time for fun.

Past the breakwater, the waves became choppier as the wind blew hard. The boat slammed against waves, splashing water at crew members. The teenagers screamed. Nai laughed and jumped for joy.

``Free shower,'' Johnston joked.

``I already took a shower,'' Blanca Cervantes, 17, answered.

As they returned to Marina Bay, Johnston sounded satisfied.

``I would take you sailing with me any day,'' he told the teenagers. ``If you ever want to join the Coast Guard, keep us in mind.''

``Good job, good team work,'' navigator Elizabeth said as the Nehemiah docked.

``That's what it's all about,'' Johnston added.

In Berkeley, Hayes, an Australian immigrant who recently won a MacArthur ``genius'' grant for his work on nuclear disarmament and energy issues, welcomed students of Rosa Parks Elementary School to the Pegasus at the Berkeley Marina.

The 5-year-old program is run in cooperation with such Berkeley outdoor youth programs as the Shorebird Nature Center and the Berkeley Boosters.

Like the crew of the Nehemiah, Hayes and the Pegasus volunteers stress the importance of safety.

``Always, one hand on the boat,'' Hayes told the 10 children as they prepared to board.

A few minutes after casting off, the engine was shut off for an aural exercise. Hayes told the children to close their eyes and count the natural and man-made sounds they could hear.

One by one, the children named the sounds: the water splashing, cars on the freeway, the wind, birds, helicopters.

``They can situate themselves in the bioregion they're in and have a personal identification with the ecosystems that support the city,'' Hayes said. ``They get basic life skills that they don't get on land.''

It's also a time to learn about self-discipline, he added.

``This is a big vessel and if you don't treat it with respect, it will hurt you,'' Hayes said.

Like the Phillipses, the Pegasus volunteers said they simply want to share with children the joys of being on the water.

``We have a passion for sailing,'' said crew member Rich Kambak. ``And we want to pass that on to the kids.''

Eleven-year-old Cathy Alexander cherished the experience.

As the Pegasus tilted sharply while making a turn, she feigned fear, yelling,

``Tilt back, tilt back. This ain't funny anymore.''

And as she sat on the sailboat's bowsprit, she was simply ecstatic.

``I'm top of the world!'' she said, the wind in her face.

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