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By [Andrew Dansby](#)

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Photos: Thomas B. Shea

Dave McCabe's love of space and the sea began when he was a child in Long Island, N.Y., where he sailed with his brothers. He also received a chemistry set from Santa Claus one Christmas and set about developing gunpowder and rockets.

His childhood experiments eventually lead to a decades-long career developing digital flight simulators for the Apollo program and computer systems for the space shuttle as well as managing data systems used at Mission Control.

Now retired, McCabe has dedicated himself to Sailing Angels, which offers free trips as recreational therapy and education for special-needs children and adults, wounded veterans, the terminally ill and victims of domestic abuse.

McCabe thinks he was in the seventh grade when special-needs children began to attend his New York school.

"Because they seemed 'different,' " he says, "The other kids looked at them with ... disdain may be too strong a word. But they certainly bullied them and made fun of them. I grew up in a Christian family with high moral values. As a result, I immediately took them under my wing. They deserved a welcoming school environment. And it wasn't sympathy I felt, just a very strong empathetic reaction. That was the trigger. That's when I first got involved with special-needs children."

McCabe moved to the Houston area in the early 1960s to work. After he retired from IBM in 2005, he began running a sailing school. He also made trans-Atlantic sails that caught the attention of the founder of an international organization that provided "nautical therapy" for children.

"He had no idea about my story, he just knew I was an avid sailor," McCabe says. "I said, 'Certainly.' " That was 2007. In 2011, McCabe spun off Sailing Angels, his own organization, which provides a similar experience.

Sailing Angels has grown to include almost 90 volunteers, with as many as three boats going out each day. Initially, the passengers were children with physical or cognitive afflictions, but McCabe expanded his reach to include others. Last year, more than 1,600 people took a two-hour trip out of Kemah with Sailing Angels.

Now, he says, "my wife would like to know when I'm going to retire."

McCabe, known as Capt. Dave, has taken passengers in wheelchairs and on stretchers with life-support equipment and medical teams. He's taken couples when one of the spouses suffers post-traumatic stress disorder from time in Iraq or Afghanistan.

"There's probably not been an issue we haven't touched," he says.

The hours spent on the water have a transformative effect on his passengers.

"It's thrilling to watch," says Kathleen Billette-Saul, whose 15-year-old son, Patrick, has autism. "Often special-needs kids have to take the back seat. But Capt. Dave gives them the captain hat when they take the wheel. He shows them how to steer, he shows them landmarks. They're actually sailing. You look around and everybody's smiling."

"Let me tell you, when we started doing this, it was obvious to me there would be a therapeutic benefit for the children. Sometimes, they have to throttle down from an emotional standpoint for a moment when they get on board. But once they get to work on the boat, steer the boat, raise the sails, tie the knots, to get really involved, they walk away with a tremendous feeling of self-esteem. To the point where I've had parents contact me saying they were going to take their kids to Disney World, but the kids wanted to go sailing instead.

"I've had children that talked for the very first time in their lives on my boat. I've had medical teams and clinicians from the VA tell me it's the most effective therapy they've seen, far better than they can achieve in a hospital environment. I think it's attributable to a lack of noise. It's an awesome experience when you get the sail up, turn the engine off and, holy mackerel, the whole world changes. The calmness, the sound of the water slapping the sides of the boats, seeing the marine life."

Sometimes, simply stepping on board proves the biggest challenge. McCabe recalls one child whose mother gave up trying.

"She turned to me and the husband and their son and said, 'You guys get him on the boat,'" McCabe says. "So it took three men to get him on board. Guess who didn't want to get off that afternoon? We got out there, he took control of the wheel and enjoyed life."