

Sailing Angels

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Boating opens new world of water for kids with disabilities

“Sailing Angels.”

At first glance, it sounds almost like an oxymoron. The word “sailor” can conjure images of grizzled, profanity-spewing old men, whereas angels are a universal symbol of virtue and purity.

After hearing Dave McCabe talk about his first experience with special needs children, however, the phrase begins to make more sense.

“When I was in intermediate school, three disabled children appeared in the school, and all three were placed in my classroom,” McCabe said. “The so-called ‘normal’ children were very ugly; they were bullies — they just did not understand. As a result, I became the self-appointed caretaker for those children. I took care of those kids from the day that they got to that school to when their families moved on and left the school system.

“There would be no bullying as long as I was there,” he added decisively, some of that sailor’s grit emerging.

It was for this reason that Pat Bell had no reservations about placing his son Walker on a sailing boat with McCabe. Now 10, Walker was diagnosed with autism at 18 months.

“He was fantastic with Walker,” Bell said. “He really seemed to understand what he was dealing with — he was very patient, spoke in a calm, clear voice. He was very clear with his instructions to Walker and what he wanted him to do and what he expected. He seemed like the nicest guy ever. You could tell he had a lot of experience dealing with special-needs kids.”

Walker is just one of more than 7,000 children with disabilities who have benefited from McCabe’s sailing expertise. Nearly five years ago, “Captain Dave,” as he is affectionately known, established the Sailing Angels Foundation, a Houston-based nonprofit charitable organization that introduces sailing to children with physical and developmental disabilities — and, more recently, wounded military veterans — as a recreational therapy method.

“We started as an international foundation — we being one chapter within this international foundation,” McCabe said. “There was a lot of encouragement from here in this general area to form a Houston-based charity, with the thought that when the donations came in, the donations would stay here in Texas. So since then, we have left that charity and established a Houston-based charity nonprofit, doing the exact same thing we did before. The beauty of the transition from the old nonprofit to the one that we have now, under the banner of Sailing Angels, is that the entire team did that transition with me.”

McCabe said the best thing about the foundation is that not only is the service provided completely free of charge, but that the majority of the donations received directly benefit the organization itself.

“If you are familiar with nonprofits, a lot of money is channeled away from the end objective in the nonprofit — administrative costs and salaries, et cetera, et cetera,” he said. “Our overhead is less than 4 percent. Everything is on a volunteer basis. I have no paid employees, including myself.

“Some potential funders have been concerned when they hear that you don’t have any salaried people, believing that it’s going to be a short-term kind of deal. But as history has shown now for five years, we’ve had continuity in our volunteer staff, and that has never become an issue. So that’s a neat thing.”

McCabe said his crew sails in Portofino Harbour Marina in Clear Lake Shores 360 days a year, taking time off only for major holidays like Christmas and Thanksgiving. A typical day consists of three trips, but it’s not unusual to make seven or eight runs.

“It’s about a two, two-and-a-half hour run,” McCabe said. “The first hour’s really at the dock, where we brief the kids and the families as to what they’re going to experience, how the boat will react and what they should anticipate, and tell them about the lifesaving equipment and getting them suited up with their life jackets, and then explaining to them about the role of the captain and their role and what they’re going to do, talk about the captain’s hat and the captain being the boss of the boat.

“They drive the boat, they raise the sails and tie the knots. When they get to drive the boat, they get to wear the captain’s hat and, in turn, they become the boss. That’s a real turn-on for them, as well.”

McCabe began sailing the high seas nearly seven decades ago, as a young boy growing up in Long Island, N.Y. His passion did not fade when he moved to Clear Lake 45 years ago to work as an aerospace engineer on the ground floor of the U.S. space program. Throughout the years, sailing has remained McCabe’s “hydro-therapy,” and he aims to share that therapy with everyone who steps onto his boat.

“It is so relaxing, so soothing,” McCabe said. “You have the sensation of the wind blowing on you gently, the rocking of the boat — and it’s also exercising your muscular system. The sound of the water lapping on the hull of the boat, and seeing the fish and the birds, all of that combined — it’s what really does it for these kids.”

That’s certainly the effect it had on Walker Bell. New environments can sometimes be a source of anxiety for children with autism, but Pat Bell said the combination of water and motion — both of which can act as stimulation for Walker — transformed his son.

“The first 15 minutes or so, we were a little out of sorts, but then he settled in,” Bell said. “You’re talking about a kid that never stops moving, but I mean, for the next hour and 15 minutes, he just sat there, steadily rocked, maybe hummed a little bit to himself. You could tell he was at peace.”

In addition to disabled children, the foundation has recently extended its services to “wounded warriors” — disabled military veterans who have been wounded in action.

“I have four or five sources of wounded warriors who come to us from the VA hospital,” McCabe said. “Some of these soldiers are coming right off the battlefield with major, major trauma. This is an integrated portion of their therapy, and they normally come to me near the very end of their therapy session. The medical team will attest that the therapy that they receive on the boat is far more effective than anything that they can do in the hospital for them. That says a lot.”

Overall, McCabe’s goal is to create a safe environment for special-needs children to enjoy a stimulating activity with both their parents and their siblings — something that is difficult to come by when you have a disabled child, Bell said.

“There’s not a lot you can do with your special-needs kids and your regular kids that everybody’s included and it’s a whole leveled playing field,” he said. “We go to Disney, and I can’t let him walk freely because if I do, he’ll just walk off. So I’ve got to hold his hand, and he’s pulling on me the whole time. This is a confined area, and that’s good because they feel safe. And it’s definitely something that most of us can experience and enjoy, and it’s not too ‘baby’ for them.”

McCabe takes care to treat the children with disabilities and their healthy siblings equally.

“There’s no distinction in how I treat them. They’re all the same,” he said. “I try to stretch them and more often than not, that is rewarding to them to not be treated as a disabled child, but as a human being. When we stretch them like that, they love it.”

“There’s a tremendous self-satisfaction on the part of our volunteers to do this,” he added. “I’m not sure who gets more benefit, quite frankly — whether it’s them or us.”

For Bell, the answer is simple. He has already encouraged the parents of at least 30 special-needs children to make their appointment, and he intends to make a return trip of his own. This time, his other sons, Walker’s twin John and 8-year-old Owen, who were away at summer camp at the time of Walker’s appointment, will tag along.

“You’d almost be foolish not to take advantage of it,” he said. “To have somebody offer you something that’s valuable, that’s an incredible service for you and your family — it’s, really, priceless. The deal with special-needs kids is, you don’t know where you’re at. You don’t know what the maximum is, and so you’ve got to be able to give them every avenue you can to recover and do whatever they can do. It really goes back to giving him more experiences. The more times he does things, the more we can find out what he’s capable of and what he can handle.

“It’s something he still talks about a month or so later — he’s still talking about the big boat and Captain Dave. Anything you can do that takes the pressure off, and you can sit back and enjoy your kid, is pretty nice.”

For more information, or to book an appointment with the Sailing Angels Foundation, visit www.sailingangels.org. Captain Dave can be reached at (281) 507-1867 or DaveMcCabe@SailingAngels.org.