

# Raising The Walls On A Community Rowing Center

THROUGH THE EFFORTS OF MANY,  
VERO BEACH ROWING IS GETTING A NEW HOME.

WRITTEN BY ANN TAYLOR



Vero Beach Rowing youth members work to stay in sync as they skim over the waters of the Indian River Lagoon. The eight-oar "Ellie Bell" is named after one of the rowers. GREG HILLS

**A**t last! After years spent searching for a protected site where they could build a boathouse and launching ramp, members of Vero Beach Rowing are looking forward to breaking ground at the MacWilliam Park boat basin this month. The long-hoped-for Community Rowing Center is finally going to become a reality, a place where young and old will have an opportunity to experience the sport that members say has enhanced their lives. Plans call for a number of rowing program offerings, including ones for breast cancer survivors, handicapped individuals with a special focus on wounded veterans, and disadvantaged youth. And that's just the short list.

This effort has taken a never-give-up attitude that began in 2008 when a handful of rowing enthusiasts got together and formed the Indian River Rowing Club, recently renamed Vero Beach Rowing. Home base was the C-54 canal four miles north of Fellsmere; the remote location was great for rowing, not so great for generating community interest in the sport. As Todd Young, Vero Beach Rowing president and master rower points out, "The water was protected, but the location was simply too far away. It took a lot for someone to drive close to an hour to get there. We knew that if we were going to create a rowing culture here we had to move to Vero."

Three years ago, thanks to support from the City of Vero Beach, the nonprofit relocated to the banks of the Indian River Lagoon under the Alma Lee Loy Bridge at 17th Street. The site was more accessible but far from ideal due to rocky launching conditions, rough water and unpredictable winds. Members considered it a temporary fix until they could find a more suitable site. Again, with the City's help, they found a new site located just north of the Barber Bridge. With a 25-year renewable lease in place, Vero Beach Rowing is ready to put down permanent roots.

A 100-foot floating dock and outdoor storage racks are currently being installed. Now comes the hard part: raising the \$2 million-plus it will take for Proctor Construction to build the two-story, 12,000-square-foot boathouse. Designed by local architect Staffan Lundberg, the first level will provide storage for boats and boating equipment; four large garage doors will open to facilitate launching. Staff offices and a conference room, exercise room, lockers and restrooms are on tap for the second level.

When construction is complete, the exterior storage racks will be made available to visiting teams from the north that want



This artist's rendering of the new boathouse shows a 100-foot floating dock to be constructed on a site in the MacWilliam Park boat basin. When complete, it will become the center of the rowing culture where people of all ages, backgrounds and abilities will have the opportunity to be out on the water.

to train here during the winter months. Two college teams have already discovered our warm temperatures and calm, friendly waters. The future of the Community Rowing Center looks rosy, but it's going to take a lot more fundraising work to make the pieces come together.

For Chris Ryan, who with Shotsi Cain Lajoie, is spearheading the capital campaign, it's déjà vu. Introduced to rowing during his freshman year at Massachusetts Institute of Technology, once he stepped into a shell and picked up the oars, he never let go. That's why after moving to Pittsburgh in the early 1980s and finding no rowing organization to connect with, he sought out others who had a passion for the sport and founded the Three

Rivers Rowing Association. Today the association is one of the largest community-based clubs in the country.

Ryan, who has served on U.S. Rowing's board of directors, sees the same opportunities for Vero Beach Rowing, albeit on a smaller scale. "We definitely have the geography that's great for rowing. With all of the beautiful water we have here in Vero Beach and to not have a rowing club, you'd have to scratch your head and wonder why," says Ryan with a quizzical smile. "Once the new boathouse is completed, it will be more than just a building to store boats in. It will allow us to be the center of the rowing culture where people of all ages, backgrounds and abilities can come together knowing they have this one great thing in common."



Chris Ryan, who has been rowing since his college days, has a love for the sport he is eager to have others experience.

TKTKTKTKTK

GREG HILLS



Staffan Lundberg, a local architect of note, designed the two-story Community Rowing Center with boat and boating equipment storage, administrative offices, lockers, and exercise room. Large garage doors will open to facilitate launching.

TKTKTKTKTK



GREG HILLS

Since arriving on the scene two years ago, Vero Beach Rowing's Gary Marra has seen interest and involvement in the sport double. With the new Community Rowing Center, he expects numbers to go off the chart.

Cheering them on will be Director of Rowing Gary Marra, a self-described, non-athletic type before being drawn to rowing his freshman year in high school by the promise that anyone could excel at the sport if they were willing to put in the work. The promise proved to be true. Marra was hooked; and after completing his collegiate rowing career, he began coaching at the University of Georgia. Since arriving in Vero Beach two years ago he has seen interest and involvement in the sport increase.

"We've nearly doubled in size in a relatively short period of time," says Marra who attributes the growth in large part to the youth programs that currently engage nearly 80 high school and middle school students. Competitively they have already proven their mettle by outperforming youth in much older and larger rowing programs by bringing home first- and second-place medals.

Yet Marra is quick to emphasize that competition is just one facet of Vero Beach Rowing's programs. "I consider rowing a character-building activity that helps shape the kids' lives. To be successful, members of a crew team have to check their egos at the dock. Their only focus needs to be on how they're helping the boat perform. As a result our kids learn teamwork and discipline, how to demonstrate

leadership and how to include others in their success."

That holds true for all ages. Marra bases his coaching philosophy on meeting people where they are. "I start by asking rowers what their personal goals are and the program they follow is then tailored to those goals. The needs of a varsity athlete trying to win a state championship are very different from those of a retiree wanting to connect with nature while improving their health and fitness."

Meet Chuck Cook, who waited until he retired at age 60 to take up rowing. "My younger daughter was a coxswain at her school, and she suggested I try it. I'd been involved in competitive sports when I was younger and ran when I was working, but knees and hips got in the way," Cook chuckles as he recalls signing up for his first rowing class. Then he signed up for another and another. It didn't take long before he was training in earnest. Before he knew it, the competition bug bit.

He is reluctant to mention his 110 medals, 20 of them gold, won while competing in national championship races including the Head of The Charles in Boston, the largest regatta in the world. "Rowing is a most unusual and wonderful sport, one that



For Chuck Cook, who began rowing as a retiree, and Gary Marra there's no better place to be than out on the water.

GREG HILLS



Two eight-oar boats pace each other as they head toward the Alma Lee Loy Bridge.

GREG HILLS



Rowers hoist a four-oar boat that weighs on the average of 110 pounds as they prepare to launch.

GREG HILLS

can be done at any age, at any level of intensity," he says, encouraging others to give it a try. "If your ambition is to simply enjoy yourself, you can get to that level very quickly. If you're competing, you have to exercise to exhaustion. You will also meet the most amazing people and make close friends."

No one knows that better than Shotsi Cain Lajoie, who in 1974 was a member of the University of Notre Dame's first women's eight-member crew team. "Rowing pushes you to another limit. It's a non-impact, full-body workout. Afterwards you're sore all over, but it's worth it," says Lajoie who continues to get together with her former crewmates and compete. "I tell people that when we used to train at Notre Dame, the temperatures were somewhere in the low 20s, steam would be coming off the water and we'd be exhausted. But we kept going. Here I'm out on the water in the early morning when it's pitch black, the temperature is in the mid-70s, the birds are singing, and seeing that absolute first light of the day is so inspiring."

This month, Lajoie, Young, Ryan, Cook, Marra and other rowing devotees will gather to dedicate Vero Beach Rowing's new site in MacWilliam Park. They will talk about the many benefits the environmentally friendly sport they love offers and the programs the new Community Rowing Center will provide to all segments of the community. Ryan will also talk about the need to raise money to meet the \$2.1 million goal. Networking with leaders in Vero Beach's philanthropic community who have either rowed or have ties to the rowing community, has resulted in pledges totaling \$750,000 but more is needed. The thrust now is to find a lead donor who would like to have their name on what might be the last community building in the Riverside Park Complex.

Bill Lane, who has rowing in his blood, has already agreed to make what he refers to as a significant gift. "Ryan's a very persuasive guy and I think the rowing center is good for Vero Beach," says Lane, who was introduced to crew during freshman

orientation at Brown University. That was the beginning of what was to become the Lane family sport.

"My kids all rowed. My daughter Gigi, who is now a high school crew coach, was on the national women's team and my son Russell was on the national men's team that won a gold medal at the Pam Am Games. Four of my eight grandchildren row, and one of them was on the National Junior Rowing Team that medaled in Rio in 2015. It's a nice tradition and one I'm very proud of," says Lane who last year sponsored an eight-oar shell named in memory of his wife, Pamela Lane.

The positive influence rowing has on people's lives cannot be understated. Coach Gary Marra has witnessed success story after success story. "I've seen people turn their lives around through rowing, whether it be by achieving sustained weight loss, overcoming diabetes or simply finding a strength in themselves they never knew they had.

"Just last year, Grayson Pench, who had never touched an oar in her life until two years earlier, was our first recipient of a full athletic scholarship to the Florida Institute of Technology. Inspired by her dedication to the sport, her father, Chris, decided to try it out for himself and is now one of our most enthusiastic adult rowers and a board member," says Marra. "Every day, I get to watch people discover new passions, achieve goals, and re-define their limits. It's an incredible environment to exist in." ☘



Shotsi LaJoie takes to the water five or more times a week, usually before dawn so she can see the magical moment when the sun begins to rise.

GREG HILLS



Youth rowers develop physical fitness, personal character and an ethic of cooperation through competitive and recreational rowing opportunities.

GREG HILLS