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APRIL 2026



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Teaching a child to sail can instill confidence that will transfer to other areas of life.

PHILANTHROPY

A Master Class

SAILING CAN TEACH IMPORTANT LIFE SKILLS



BY JEFFREY R. PICKERING

Sails Meeting. Friday, January 23, 2026, 2:30 p.m.

No, that is not a misspelling. It is the entry I made on my office calendar after reluctantly accepting an invitation to go sailing on the Indian River Lagoon. It was the end of a full week, after an already busy start to the new year, and I was looking forward to a rare

Friday during “season” with no evening events scheduled. Maybe I could cancel.

“Dad, you have to go,” demanded my daughter, Olivia, who was still home from college preparing for her spring semester abroad.

“Yeah, Dad, you made us all do it,” added my 12-year-old son, Grant. “Now it’s your turn.”

Yes, each of our children

had been enrolled at one time or another in Youth Sailing Foundation’s classes or camps. I thought they would have fun. Looking back at the other recreational activities each one pursued, now I was not so sure.

I sent a cross-country, fact-checking text to my son Colin, who had already started his final semester of college on the West Coast. “Olivia and

INDIAN RIVER INSIGHTS



Grant, Olivia, and Colin Pickering were all taught sailing at YSF over the years.

Grant are saying I made you all learn to sail. *Made you?* He replied with a “thumbs up” emoji followed by a meme clip of Jack Nicholson’s character from the film *A Few Good Men* mouthing the words “We follow orders.”

Message received. Like it or not, I was going sailing.

My host for this outing was Jamie Bell, president of Complete Trust Insurance and current chairman of the United Way of Indian County’s board of directors. We had run into each other the week before at a groundbreaking ceremony for YSF Community Sailing’s new Pat Harris Community

Sailing Center. It is being named with a \$1 million gift in memory of the organization’s longtime chairman.

I assumed Jamie was in attendance as one of the many donors who, like Indian River Community Foundation, helped YSF raise the \$5 million needed to build the 10,000-square-foot facility. I learned, however, that Jamie also serves on YSF’s board of directors and, as an active member of the adult sailing program, regularly races Laser sailboats.

“You should come sailing with me sometime,” Jamie suggested enthusiastically.

He knew I was an avid



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surfer, so I imagine his invitation was being made waterman to waterman. Or it might have been one of those comments that some people make in passing while trying to be friendly. Golf, pickleball, and tennis usually make that list. Since I became legally blind in November 2022, Jamie's invitation was one of those offers that I secretly hoped he would forget about making.

My blindness comes from an inherited eye disorder called retinitis pigmentosa (RP) that causes progressive degeneration of the retina and a loss of peripheral vision. Imagine holding up two paper

in the rather forgiving liquid form of water. I wasn't so sure that sailing, with all its gear and moving parts, would be as forgiving.

After almost a week had passed since I'd talked with Jamie, I thought I was in the clear—until his email arrived. The following day's forecast looked great for sailing. We planned to meet at 2:30 p.m. at YSF's launch site on the southwest side of the Alma Lee Loy Bridge.

I imagine sailing, like surfing, has its own pre-session rituals that consist of checking the weather, the waves, and gear. The night before,



YSF students learn to sail on the Indian River Lagoon.

towel rolls to your eyes and you will get a good idea of what it is like. Now dim the lights. That's RP.

Fortunately, I still have my central vision, which has allowed me to continue surfing, albeit with some adjustments. I ride a stand-up paddleboard. I try to avoid crowds. While hazards remain, wipeouts still end up

nervous energy makes it hard to sleep. I felt a bit of the same before going sailing.

When I arrived the next afternoon, Jamie had almost finished rigging the sailboat, a Hobie Getaway. The 17-foot catamaran had two sails and a trampoline stretched between two hulls. This particular boat was outfitted with a wing set on each hull that served as a

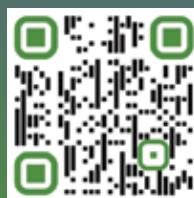
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INDIAN RIVER INSIGHTS



About 300 children are introduced to sailing each year by YSF Community Sailing, and they are from all walks of life.

backrest on lazy days or as an extended platform for sailors to “hike out” on windy days. Several lines rested on the tramp, a mainsheet for the mainsail, a jib sheet for the smaller sail closer to the bow, and a halyard to raise the mainsail.

To my surprise, the Hobie Getaway was missing a downhaul, the line used to lower the boom. The boom is a horizontal bar that runs along the bottom of the mainsail to keep its shape. Jamie joked that it is named for the sound it makes when a sailor forgets to lower his or her head when the sail comes about from one side to the other. The Hobie Getaway’s sail is made to work without a boom, however, making the experience a bit more forgiving for an unsuspecting (or in my case, blind) sailor.

As we prepared to launch, I reminded Jamie that I was visually impaired but still capable of helping. I’m not used to taking orders but found it strangely comforting when Jamie directed me to help pull the boat into the water, to climb aboard, to work the jib sheet, and to adjust the dolly and haul the boat out of the water when we finished.

As we set sail, Jamie told me to look back at the shore. With a northeast wind blowing at just 10 to 12 knots, I was shocked at how much distance we traveled in the first 30 seconds of being underway.

For the next 90 minutes or so, we sailed back and forth across the lagoon, with Jamie explaining maneuvers like jibing (when the boat’s stern

crosses through the wind) and tacking (when the boat's bow crosses through the wind.) The sun shone, and first a dolphin and then a manatee played in our wake. Pelicans dive-bombed to catch their evening meal. It felt like I was stealing an experience that many people fly across the country to take part in.

Over the years, there have been times when I have been asked about or even criticized for financial contributions that the Community Foundation has made to YSF. Sometimes these questions or criticisms come with observations such as, "There are too many nonprofits" or "Sailing is a sport for rich kids." I

asked Jamie what he thought about that.

"You'd know more than I would about the number of charities in our community and whether or not they are duplicating services," he replied. (The data the Community Foundation collects on Indian River County nonprofits does not support this point of view.)

"As far as sailing being a sport for rich kids," he continued, "that is not our experience. Of the 300 or more children YSF introduces to sailing each year, half come

from underserved households that include children sponsored by the Homeless Children's Foundation. Sailing keeps many motivated to do well in school. For others it keeps them out of trouble. For all of them, sailing helps to

build confidence."

Sailing teaches us that while the direction of the wind is beyond our control, we can adjust our sails to reach our destination. A lesson, thanks to YSF Community Sailing, that is free for everyone. ✨

A recent groundbreaking was held for the Pat Harris Community Sailing Center, shown here in an artist's rendering.

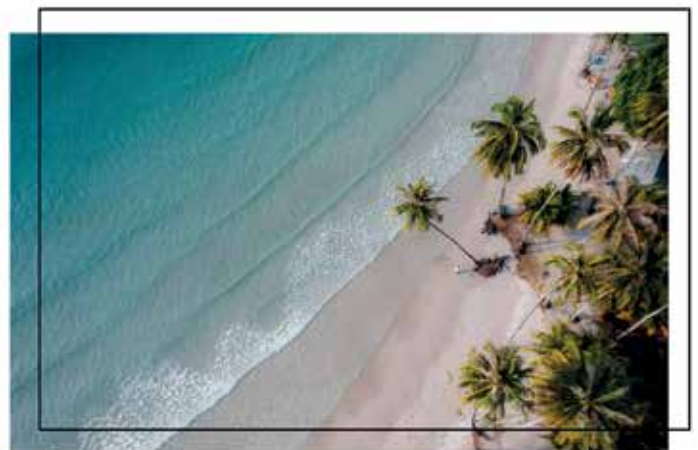


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