

# Rafiki

Last month, I witnessed a kindhearted, wild-haired idea as it sprouted, magically opened doors, and manifested itself into an exceptional sailing weekend. This may be my first and last Milwaukee-New-Orleans-Chicago-Annapolis sailing story with an Oahu twist, so bear with me as I untangle the details.

As co-president of the J/30 association, Dave Erwin (New Orleans, LA) was the first to read a newsletter article about the competitive, all-girl teenage crew who sail the J/30 *Rafiki* out of Milwaukee, WI. The father of two of the teens and the newsletter article's author happens to be Nicholas Hayes, the author of *Saving Sailing*, a book about how families and communities can carve out time to make healthier choices, namely sailing more together (find his latest article on page 56).

Erwin and his sailing buddy, Louisianan Scott Tonguis, pondered how they could get the all-girl Team Rafiki to sail with them in Annapolis for the J/30 National Championship Regatta September 16-18. Following a Facebook inquiry, parental conference calls, requests for school days off, a borrowed boat, and a second borrowed boat for lodging, and more e-mails than any of the dozen players can count, the idea started to materialize—within three weeks—much to the surprise and delight of all involved.

Hayes forked out frequent flyer miles. Annapolis J/30 sailor or Bonnie Schloss offered her boat *Bear Away* and her local knowledge as a crewmember. A friend of SpinSheet, Michael Jewell, who was leaving for a surfing vacation in Oahu, HI, offered his Eastport-based, 40-foot O'Day *Moon Bounce* as lodging for the young sailors. Chicagoan J/30 sailor and 160-pounder Dennis Bartley agreed to round out the crew to make the team weight work. A dizzying number of puzzle pieces came together as if magnetically.

I met Whitney and Alison Kent and Kate and Elizabeth Hayes (all between the ages of 14-18) in the marina parking lot next door on a chilly, drizzly September 15 evening, after they had woken up at 4:30 a.m., flown to Baltimore, met Erwin for the first time at the airport (with their PFDs in hand), gotten weighed in, and practiced spinnaker drills on the Bay for a couple of hours. Team Rafiki looked undaunted, yet a little travel-weary. Their eyes lit up when they saw their weekend floating home, complete with heat, a shower, and a stereo with an iPod plug-in. There were smiles all around as I gave them a mini-tour of the boat's systems and left them alone.

The next day, with 18-year-old Whitney driving, Kate and Elizabeth trimming jib, and Alison working the foredeck, Team Rafiki won the first race and became the talk of the town. Forget that they had a few races they would rather delete the next day. These young sailors captured a first, a second, and a third in a seven-race national regatta and earned a fifth-place overall finish of 19 competing boats (see page 125). They had the time of their lives.

Here's why this story matters: Team Rafiki's skipper, Whitney, a college freshman, will turn 38 years old in 20 years. I can promise you she won't stop sailing between now and then. She's going to pull out a can of whoop-ass and win in J/30s and beyond. She will buy boats, organize events, and invite newcomers into sailing. I promise you that Alison, who had "the best sailing weekend of [her] life" will do so, too. Genetically, Kate and Elizabeth have no choice but to sail for life and share the sport with others.

Kate's note to me says, "I've never had a sailing weekend like

that before. Everyone we met was so incredibly supportive and genuinely excited to see us there. Whenever we ate (which we did a lot of), we pulled up extra tables and extra chairs for the sailors who would come visit with us. We were surrounded by a whole bundle of new friends. When I got home, the next day at school, I felt lonely. I was surrounded by kids my own age, but it just felt empty without that constant flow of sailors."

Don't invite young people on your boat to "save sailing." Don't invite them because you

want to earn brownie points into heaven as a mentor. Do it for the same reason Erwin did—he thought these young sailors seemed like a breath of fresh air. He felt inspired by them. He thought the girls would be cool to hang out with on a race boat. His hunches were on the mark.

Whitney, Alison, Kate, and Elizabeth call themselves Team Rafiki. Rafiki was the monkey from "The Lion King," whose name means "friend" in Swahili. Why not give a young person a chance to steer your boat because he or she seems like a neat person you would like to befriend? It worked for Erwin and Tonguis. I had dinner with the motley Milwaukee-New-Orleans-Chicago-Annapolis crew. I know this much to be true: after one unbelievable weekend sailing together on a borrowed J/30, they will always be friends.



Whitney Kent, Scott Tonguis, Alison Kent, Bonnie Schloss, Kate Hayes, Dave Erwin, Elizabeth Hayes, and Dennis Bartley.

Molly