

Meet Rachel Bahm, Captain for Sisters Under Sail

Captain Rachel Bahm, Master of the Tall Ship *Unicorn*, remembers the exact moment she was bitten by the sailing bug. "I grew up on the Gulf Coast, and my uncle had a 20-foot O'day when I was in junior high school," says Rachel. "I went out a handful of times and would sit on the bow workin' on my tan pretty much every time, but I thought, 'This looks like it could be so much fun... I want to take the tiller.'" On one occasion, we came across a *wicked* storm. The sky turned black over the horizon and the wind and seas came up all of a sudden. We tried to get back into the dock but we couldn't bear it. My uncle kept the main up for stability, but that also heeled us over. While my uncle was white-knucklin' the tiller with fear in his eyes, my cousins and I sat athwartships in the cockpit - essentially standing up straight - and smiling huge grins. We had a little skiff when I lived in Mississippi, and to this day my mom says that when I got behind the wheel I was ten feet tall!"

"When I was 21 I worked on supply boats in the oil fields out of Texas and Louisiana for two years," Rachel recalls. "I moved to Key West at 25, and that's where I really started sailing. I started out as crew with Danger Charters and learned how to sail with some really great captains who were happy to teach. I sailed lots of different boats from Lasers, 420s and 20-foot Victorias to 80-footers, my own little gaff-rigged catamaran that some friends had built, and got to crew on the Schooner *America*."

After attending a maritime school in Florida and getting her U.S. Coast Guard license, Rachel captained 60-foot catamarans out of Key West before deciding to head north. "I was working on *Gerónimo* out of Newport [designed by Ted Hood specifically for St. George's School as their sailing school vessel, the 69-foot cutter sloop was built by New England Boat Works in 1998]. It's a really great program. The captain of the *Unicorn*, Tiffany Krihwan, needed an officer on board. She called her friend Deb Hayes [*Gerónimo* Program Director and captain-at-sea during spring and summer cruises] and asked if she knew of anyone. Captain Hayes vouched for the program, so I came aboard and I really enjoy it."

This is Rachel's second season running Sisters Under Sail (SUS), a sail training leadership development program for teenage girls. SUS participants handle all shipboard duties from cooking and cleaning to setting and trimming sails, navigating and steering, exceeding their own perceived abilities as they sail the Chesapeake and Northeast.

"I'm really impressed with the program," says Rachel, who lives aboard the 118-foot (sparrled length) square topsail gaff-rigged schooner year-round, overwintering at Captain's Cove Seaport on Black Rock Harbor in Bridgeport, CT. "We are the only tall ship specifically sailed by an all-female crew - at the height of the season we have eight. We do some trips with inner city students who've never been on the water. They're out of their element, and often timid, looking like little puppy dogs when they



come on board," she notes with slumping shoulders and downcast eyes.

"Their attitude, posture, voice, persona and spirit all change. By the end of the week they know the lines, they're able to handle the docklines, they're plotting and navigating capably,

and they know how to call back commands. Finding your voice and learning how to be heard is a very substantial part of the program. It's a lot of fun to watch the girls climbing the rigging (and the boys in the boys' programs and the women in the Leadership Sail Program too). They look up 90 feet and get to the second, third or fourth rung. Left on their own, many would probably never go any further, but the others encourage them and, all of a sudden they're up at the crossrees."

"I'm really excited about this season. We depart Bridgeport for West Point, then down to Baltimore, which is great for the kids because there's so much history and maritime knowledge to be gained. We'll head north to Nova Scotia, with a couple stops along the way, and we'll be participating in the ASTA Tall Ships Atlantic Challenge 2009 [American Sail Training Association; sailtraining.org], sailing along with other tall ships and doing races."

"We've typically done only five-hour daysails with our women's program, but this year they're coming aboard for the Gloucester Mayor's Race, the Gloucester to Provincetown Race and the P-Town Race. It'll be a little faster-paced and we won't be coming in first, but we'll have a lot of fun. The *Unicorn's* fun to sail because we can set about a dozen sails, utilizing a variety of sail configurations. She was built to sail the North Sea and is the kind of boat that once you're familiar with her and know what makes her happy, you can get her moving at a decent clip...when the wind's blowin' and you get the sails set just so, you feel the boat *lift* and surge forward."

"It should take four or five days to reach Nova Scotia. It's a lot of open water and we're sailing with interns who've all been aboard once or twice. They're outstanding girls and we know they can handle the challenge. A lot of them are setting personal goals, whether it's a strength they want to work on or learning more in the engine room. [SUS] gives girls an appreciation for sailing and feeds their passion in a nurturing environment. I think about what they've accomplished in one week, and I can't wait to see what they'll do in three."

To learn more about STV Unicorn and Sisters Under Sail, visit tallshipunicorn.com. ♦

