

Sisters Under Sail

by Greta Waag

"The voice of the sea is seductive; never ceasing, whispering, clamoring, murmuring, inviting the soul to wander for a spell in the abysses of solitude; to lose itself in mazes of inward contemplation. The voice of the sea speaks to the soul. The touch of the sea is sensuous, enfolding the body in its soft close embrace."

(The Awakening, Kate Chopin)



I have a passion for the sea. It gives me a sense of freedom and independence that I don't get on land. The wind runs its fingers through my long curly red hair and the salt spray revives me. It's the only place I feel I can put all other problems behind me and truly find myself. I didn't always know I had this passion. This discovery of self contentment was introduced to me in the summer of '07 when I stepped aboard the 118-foot tall ship schooner, *Unicorn*.

I became involved with the program "Sisters Under Sail" through Girl Scouts. I didn't really know what to expect. I was nervous and apprehensive of my surroundings. I was being thrown into a new environment with people I didn't know and a completely different lifestyle than I was used to. I had never really gone sailing before, so I had no experience. I couldn't have guessed what the next few days entailed.

The first day or so was used for adjustment. When we were told we couldn't shower for a week, the crew laughed when we asked, "Are you kidding?" And I also had to share a living space four times smaller than my own bedroom with five other girls! I remember getting frustrated because I couldn't understand why I had to call the bathroom a head, or why the kitchen was called the

galley. Everything took some getting used to, especially that urge to say some choice words to the person who woke me up for watch at three in the morning. However, slowly things started to fall into place. The memorization of the 70 pins and their locations gradually started to click. The strange forms of repeating commands began to seem somewhat normal. Through the constant need to use my outdoor voice, I was really pried out of my protective shell. Being only 14 when I first started participating, I was shy, insecure and unsure of myself or who I really was. The crew pushed us to our fullest capacity, so I found what I was actually capable of if I set my mind to it. They never let us settle on those common responses of "I give up" or "I can't do it" and, because of this, I proved to myself that my abilities were far greater than I had ever known.

As the week went on, I found confidence within myself I didn't know existed. The boat also seemed to transform itself into my second home. The camaraderie between the crew really stole my heart. I felt like I truly belonged. As trainees we became more comfortable with each other; living six in a room can do that to you. We all let down our guards and it brought out our natural beauty. No one wore

makeup, no one took the time to do her hair in the morning and it didn't matter, we were still the best of friends.

When we raised the sails, we chanted together in rhythm – “heavy, ho, heave, ho.” We worked as a team and hauled till our hands were sore, but we didn't care because we had succeeded in a shared goal. Afterwards, we were all smiles and gave each other energetic high-fives.

Finally the day came to climb the shrouds! This was probably the scariest thing I've ever done in my life but it had the most significant impact. I started to climb, one rung at a time, not knowing when my legs were going to refuse to carry me higher. I was scared out of my mind, but I had such a supportive group of friends who I'd met only days before cheering me on, telling me I could do it. Their energy was transferred into confidence. It was as if I had my own safety net urging me to keep moving forward. When I finally reached the top, they all cheered and a rush of accomplishment surged through me like I'd never experienced before. It felt like I was on top of the world; nothing could bring me down now. While descending the 96-foot-high mast, I reflected on what I'd done: I was able to conquer my fears, and I promised myself that if I could do that, I could do so much. I could overcome any obstacle.

The nights were cool, and we would lie on the deck in the shadows of moonlight reflecting off the water. Some nights we stargazed, others we sang sea chanteys. I recall an intense game of charades on another. No matter what activity we were engaged in, there was never a time where we felt we didn't belong. We would laugh with each other and share our favorite parts of the day and because of this we were drawn closer.

My life unfolded on that ship. I found the true meaning of things and what really makes me happy. These experiences allow me to find pride in who I am today. I can hold my head high because I now know my true self. I will never forget my experiences of that summer; I can truly say it was “the adventure of a lifetime.” By the end of the week, we honestly considered ourselves sisters and it was so difficult to say goodbye. We exchanged contact information knowing we'd be sisters for life because no matter what our background was or no matter who we were a week ago, we were stepping back onto solid land as different people. We had all learned so much about ourselves and each other we knew nothing would ever change. We would carry the memory of this adventure with us forever.

I am pleased to say, the program had such an impact on my life that I have returned every summer since. This program works to boost self-assurance in young adults. The mission statement provided on the website is: “to build confidence and self-esteem, increase social conscience and teach how empowering it is to work with your sisters towards a common goal.” I can certainly say I greatly benefited from the program's mission.

This summer I returned for an even longer and more fulfilling experience. Due to my prior expeditions, I was asked to work as a deckhand. I proudly accepted and



tried to become skilled at all my new responsibilities while living up to expectations. Easily put, I became the rookie deckhand; it was a good challenge for me and forced me to work hard at something I absolutely loved. I was given a different perspective than that of two years ago. This time I was the one sitting on the crosstrees, the one the girls climbed up to in the shrouds. I got to see firsthand that smile on their face; the one that lit up in knowing that they conquered the impossible, something they never dreamed of doing. I gained so much by teaching them something I knew well and then watching them succeed at it. I shared in their sense of accomplishment. I felt like I made a difference. I watched each girl step off the boat a little more self-assured than when she had started and knowing I could have been a part of that change means more than anything. My favorite part however, is the panicked faces of the incoming girls when told they would not be able to shower for a week. It always makes me laugh. ♪

