

While Summerfest rocks next door, teens leave Discovery World on own big gig

Project YESS gives underserved group from Cleveland life skills through sailing

By **TOM JOZWIK**
Special to The Post

MILWAUKEE – The day after Summerfest opened virtually next door, 14 teenagers left Discovery World on a big gig of their own.

The youngsters, ages 13 through 17, were involved in a project that, as publicists put it, “helps underserved youth build character, improve self-confidence and develop valuable life skills through sailing.”

Having traveled to Milwaukee by bus, the teens set sail June 27 for their hometown of Cleveland, Ohio, on the Denis Sullivan – known alternatively as “Discovery World’s mobile ambassador” and “Wisconsin’s official flagship.” The sailing vessel has been further described as “a floating classroom for water education programs.”

Unique in the world as a recreated 19th-century Great Lakes schooner, the 13-year-old tall ship, nearly 140 feet long and boasting a sail area of 4,600 square feet, was named for the owner-captain of a ship on which the Sullivan’s design was based. Captain Denis Sullivan’s schooner Moonlight earned the nickname “Queen of the Lakes,” according to Web information, as the reputedly “fastest and finest cargo vessel on the Great Lakes” in the 1870s.

On the morning the six-day, 650-nautical mile Great Lakes voyage from Milwaukee to Cleveland began, employees of sponsor Robert W. Baird & Co., which has Waukesha as well as Milwaukee locations, showed up at the Discovery World dock to see the travelers off. Those bidding farewell included Milwaukeean Scott Falk, chief administrative officer of the Private Wealth Management Group, a business unit under the Baird umbrella.

“Baird works very closely with the communities in which we’re located,” Falk said, noting a Cleveland-based Baird employee had encouraged the Baird Foundation’s support of the sailing project, Project YESS.

Created by the Rotary Club of Cleveland, YESS stands for Youth Empowered to Succeed through Sailing. As Project YESS participants, the youngsters from Cleveland were to journey home at a typical hourly speed of 11.7 to 11.8 knots (1 knot equaling 1.5 miles). In the process, they would learn the ropes (perhaps literally) of sailing well enough to supplement the efforts of the

Sullivan’s 10-member crew. On Lake Erie, at its Port of Cleveland destination, the Sullivan was to join the 2013 Cleveland Tall Ships Festival as one of about a dozen participating vessels.

What does Baird get out of its connection with Project YESS?

“No. 1,” said Falk, “it’s an opportunity to serve some of the underserved (disadvantaged) kids in the Cleveland area.”

And what might the adolescents expect to get out of their six days of sailing? “So many things,” mused the Sullivan’s captain, Tiffany Krihwan, who grew up on Lake Erie and now lives in Milwaukee. She mentioned camaraderie and team-building, but contended “the biggest thing they’ll take away is that they can do anything they put their minds to.”

Krihwan, as a female in a male-dominated profession who took biological and environmental courses in college to achieve her goal of working on a research vessel, exemplifies that axiom.

Retired math teacher Joe Ewing of Menomonee Falls, the volunteer education officer whose lengthy connection with the Sullivan started with his helping to build the ship, fleshed out the captain’s comments. “The main thing they get out of (the voyage) is individual growth,” Ewing said. “Coming on this vessel is the great leveler. Some (participants in one Sullivan educational program or another) haven’t seen a lake before.”

On the topic of teamwork, the long-time volunteer said Project YESS participants “have to rely on the person next to (them) to do their part.” He added that the traveling adolescents would be given “a healthy dose of environmental education.” They would do “hands-on” activities, such as testing water quality, and learn about invasive species. Time permitting, they would be exposed to “sail theory” and knot-tying.

As add-ons to the crew and under professional guidance, the teens would do hourly checks and stand watch for longer periods. They would sleep in compartments reminiscent of train berths and keep their personal items on shelves inside those compartments. With an 850-gallon fresh water capacity on ship, nobody aboard – with the exception of the crew’s cook – would be allowed to shower; a couple of lake swims, closely supervised by one or more crew members skilled in water safety, would substitute for bathing. If the ship doesn’t



Photos courtesy of Discovery World

Top and bottom: The S/V Denis Sullivan schooner sails past the Milwaukee skyline recently. The ship set sail June 27 with a group of teenagers from Cleveland back to their hometown in Ohio as part of the Project YESS program.

exactly smell like lilacs by a journey’s end, joked Ewing, “at least we’re all in the same boat.”

Commented Discovery World’s president and CEO Joel Brennan, a Milwaukee resident who grew up in Waukesha County and attended Brookfield’s St. John Vianney Grade School, “I think (Project YESS) is the kind of thing that can be life-changing for these kinds of kids. Conservation strategy, teamwork – very exciting! A high-impact program.”

Brennan toured the Sullivan with his adolescent nieces from the Madison and Chicago areas, both of them involved, he noted, in Discovery World summer activities apart from the Sullivan trip – a CSI camp and a fashion design camp.

“All our camps are about connecting young people with professionals” in their fields of interest, said the CEO.

Observing that the number of Discovery World summer campers has grown tremendously over several years, Brennan added, “I think we’re meeting needs throughout the whole region.”

And through Project YESS, he might’ve added, well beyond the region.

Discovery World’s replica schooner – wooden, with three masts and 10 sails and a gross tonnage of 97 tons – offers programs for adults, as well as children from preschool through high school. Volunteers are welcome on the Sullivan



(most who currently volunteer do so as deck hands) and elsewhere at Discovery World.

For additional information, go to www.discoveryworld.org.