



'Sailing for Life'

An article written by

Andrew Sheard

about

Sailability Hong Kong

Sailing for Life

“When someone first mentioned my son and sailing I thought, this is crazy, there’s just no way he could go sailing.”

Penny explained that a lot of people expect to be full time parents as their children grow up, but they don’t expect that when their child is twenty five years old.

For many disabled adults who need 24-hour care, even simple tasks like squeezing toothpaste onto a tooth brush or walking down steps can prove impossible without help. So how can sailing play a part in the lives of these dependent members of our world?

The Sailability website proudly invites anyone to come and see what they do, and proudly states “you will be amazed!” It’s a boast well made.

Saturday Sailors is Sailability’s longest established programme and Mark Gor is leading the group this morning. When he was young Mark wanted to be a Youth Leader, but somehow ended up in merchandising. Times change and so do the generations, so when he sought to follow his dream he felt his time for being a Youth worker had passed. However as a recreational sailor Mark noticed that people with disabilities were really happy when they were sailing. Now he uses sailing for “life education” and it’s truly his life’s work.

When he thinks of the people who have started sailing in his classes and are now taking part in international sailing events, in an understated way Mark simply says he is “proud of them” and their personal growth through sailing. He adds “the reaction of parents is so rewarding, seeing how happy they are that their son or daughter can sail.”

A group of disabled people gather around a flipchart for the pre sail briefing. Mark leads this safety briefing full of enthusiasm like he’s never done it before when in fact he’s done hundreds and maybe even thousands of briefings over the years. “What’s the weather today?” shouts Mark. “Raining.” “Is it!?” “Cloudy and windy.” “Yes. And what does that mean?” “We only need to use one sail on the boat today.” “What else?” “Sun lotion. Yes protect ourselves from the sun’s rays even on a dull day.” There is great excitement at the prospect of a morning out on the water!

Most people are paired for sailing, although a few prefer to sail single handed. The yachts are assembled alongside the jetty, ready for boarding. With varying degrees of mobility and coordination among the sailors, boarding is approached carefully by the instructors and one-by-one each person is assisted into their yacht. Some require little help other than steadying the boat, whilst others are lowered into their seat. It feels like a precarious moment but once seated, the sailors are settled and quieter, focussing on what they need to do next. In their dependant lives, for once, when they are in the boat, they approach independence. Help is never far away of course, but it is a significant step.

Out on the water, the sea is grey and so is the sky. But the small yachts bring a dash of colour with their sails of orange, luminous green, pink, yellow, sky blue, and white. The life jackets too are luminous orange or yellow. The boats lie low in the water making them stable and impossible to overturn. Some

make their own way out of the calm waters of the harbour towards the waters off Trio Beach, while others are towed there by a motorised inflatable used by the instructors. The bigger safety boat towing a line of smaller, lower dinghy boats is reminiscent of a mother duck leading her young ducklings in a line across the water. This procession passes by the hundreds of boats and yachts moored in Hebe Haven including several missing their masts since the last Typhoon in September and sadly, one formerly grand yacht laying on its side in the water. It was previously home to a couple until ravaged by Typhoon Mangkhut (although Hebe Haven escaped lightly compared to some other Yacht Clubs in Hong Kong).

There are normally at least two motorised safety boats for instruction and safety purposes and the instructors maintain constant radio communication with each other throughout the trip. The disabled sailors are assisted if necessary depending on their experience and skill. If they drift away from the designated area, one of the safety boats is there to guide them back.

The Sailability yachts cost tens of thousands of Hong Kong dollars, but not far away yachts pass by which cost millions in any currency. These luxury vessels seem to glide smoothly across the water. People standing on deck sipping champagne are still, unmoved by any motion of the sea, out to enjoy the fruits of their labour.

Away from the calm water of the harbour the Sailability boats bob up and down in the water and this is part of the fun. Spray from the wave tops flicks up in the breeze into the faces of the sailors. Cue laughter and shouting all round. It is fascinating that people who struggle to hold a conversation, can become perplexed by the movement of an escalator, and need assistance in getting dressed can be so confident, so self-assured when sailing a yacht. For many people, it would be the other way round entirely, confident at those everyday tasks – weak and wobbly at the thought of sailing. No wonder the Sailability website says visitors will be amazed. Being afloat on the water appears to be a soothing, transformative experience.

Alexandra is one of the sailors on today's trip. She has an intellectual disability and has been with Sailability for nine years. She has taken part in international sailing tournaments in Australia and Japan and although a competent sailor explains that she prefers to sail with a friend because she likes the community and friendships she has built up over the years. She describes Kay, one of the co-founders of Sailability Hong Kong, as "like a Mum to me".

Despite having started sailing as recently as 2014, Foo Yuen Wai and Puk Chi Yeung are two of Sailability's most successful para sailors. Both Foo and Puk suffered from polio as children, leaving Foo wheelchair bound, and Puk needing crutches to walk. But out on the water, the para sailors use yachts in which the controls are adapted for their disability, which allows the disabled to complete on equal terms with the able bodied. It's a claim not many sports can truly make.

Foo and Puk have both sailed for Hong Kong in international competitions in Korea, Australia, Japan, Holland, Germany, Finland, UK and the USA. Competing overseas gives sailors the opportunity to hone their skills in different conditions, becoming more accomplished and more confident. In Australia the waves are bigger and the yachts go much faster than they do in the calmer waters of Hong Kong, providing a sterner test of any sailor's skill and nerve. For the future, the two para sailors have their eyes set on the para Olympics in Japan in 2020; they also want to give back to Hong Kong by helping others to take their first steps into a boat. Foo laughs when he says he can't swim and assumed he had no chance

to sail, but after Sailability gave him the chance, he loves it! Being out on a boat “brings human and water together in harmony” he explains. “The waves carry you up and down, like the rhythms of life.”

The two para sailors are quick to pay tribute to the Hebe Haven Yacht Club, and to their coach who they describe as an older brother. “Brother” Ed Tang has been sailing for more than 20 years. He has a mane of straggly hair that catches attention, and although it’s a grey day at the yacht club, he always wears sunglasses. Like everyone involved in Sailability, he has a passion for sailing and giving the opportunity to sail to as many as possible, especially those who have previously assumed it was out of reach for them.

Hong Kong Sailability began after a fractious committee meeting in 2009, when Mark Houghton, at the time Commodore of Hebe Haven Yacht Club, asked Mike and Kay Rawbone to start Sailability Hong Kong. Based on the British and Australian Sailability models the Hong Kong charity seeks to enhance a person’s sense of achievement, improve their self-confidence, independence and life skills. In Hong Kong, Sailability started with two boats purchased personally by Mike and Kay and now has 27 Sailing dinghies in four sailing classes plus 3 Safety Boats, many of these donated by corporate sponsors and the Hong Kong Sailing Clubs. Since its inception, Sailability has provided 1,670 different people with a disability the opportunity to sail, many of whom sail regularly. The organisation now has sailing programmes throughout the week ranging from complete beginners to internationally experienced sailors.

The development of Sailability led to Sailability & World Sailing arranging and hosting Asia's first Paralympic Development Program at Hebe Haven Yacht Club in March 2017. Hong Kong is now the leading centre in Asia for sailing for those with a disability. Hong Kong Sailability competes both locally and internationally with physically and intellectually disabled sailors and its sailors have won medals in Korea, Australia, Japan and Hong Kong. The growth of Sailability and its impact on the international world of para sailing is a little known success story in Hong Kong which deserves to be feted more widely in the city territory.

Mike Rawbone grew up in the maritime community of Gosport, Southern England and has been sailing since he was eight years old. He worked as a Human Resources consultant before focusing on Sailability fulltime. He taught Kay to sail once they were married. Kay works at a leading NGO for intellectually disabled adults in Hong Kong. They have made Hong Kong their home over 15 years now and working together as a team they have all the skills needed to lead Sailability.

Penny and Terry Mountain bring their son to Sailability every Saturday. They are quick to pay a full and warm tribute to the founders of Sailability in Hong Kong. “I don’t know how Mike and Kay do it. Providing a safe environment for everyone is of paramount importance. Kay’s ability to have a relationship with the sailors and the naturalness of the way she deals with the disabled sailors is wonderful. Mike in one word is persistence. He has the sailing heritage and the passion for sailing. Kay has the passion for people.”

Intellectual Disabilities includes such a wide range of disabilities, everyone is different. It’s a term that includes the autistic spectrum, learning difficulties, and Downs Syndrome. Each person is also an individual and you have to get to know the individual people and their disabilities.

Terry and Penny look back over their time at Sailability. They explain that when they first came to Sailability their son Simon needed help getting out of the car, walking across the car park, down the steps, putting his life jacket on, getting into the boat, ordering food afterwards all of which he can do independently now. "It's stunning, mind blowing" says Penny. "It's a safe, secure environment. I can't imagine Simon without Sailability, he has matured and grown so much."

Hebe Haven is a pleasant spot for sure but Sailability is more than just a sailing activity programme, it's a community which disabled people and parents can belong to and feel supported. Terry and Penny feel part of that community and the sustenance it offers.

Simon takes part in many activities each week such as soccer and bowling, and is made to feel welcome at each one of them. He mixes with the people there and joins in the activity. But Sailability is the only environment where he is able to interact with his friends on his own level. After the morning sail, the disabled sailors order lunch and sit at one of the table's overlooking Hebe Haven while parents and volunteers eat at a neighbouring table. Amid the laughter and camaraderie, each table group is providing the right level of conversation and community support needed.

Simon's father Terry says "Diversity and inclusion is a rather dry, technical phrase, but what does it mean? For us, at Sailability it means Simon is included. It's so important for us all to feel part of something."

Penny and Terry expect more from Sailability in future. Simon has progressed slowly but surely during the last seven years since he took those first faltering steps into a boat. There's been no sudden giant leap in his skill or level of independence. It's a slow, long march. But with Sailability, they expect it to continue.

Written By Andrew Sheard

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About the author: Originally from the UK, Andrew Sheard has lived in Hong Kong since 2001 working in HR throughout that time. He has been a mentor with Hong Kong university students since 2004 and Director of a well-known Hong Kong NGO since 2012. In 2018/19 he wrote this article as part of an on-line course on Feature Writing with University of Cape Town.