

Sail MV in 2020: Not an Ordinary Year

AS WINTER 2020 TURNED to spring, it became clear—gradually at first and then with undeniable force—that this would not be an ordinary year for Sail Martha's Vineyard.

On the first weekend of February, global restrictions were imposed on airline travel and the United States declared a public health emergency. Andrew Nutton, Sail MV's programs director, and John Kettlewell, executive director, began their conversations about what this might mean for the organization's summer classes and events.

Then over a single weekend in mid-March, the scope of the emergency came into sharp focus when the President declared COVID-19 a national emergency and imposed a ban on travel from Europe. Across the Vineyard, public schools closed, and all activities involving large gatherings of people were put on hold.

Kettlewell made a quick visit to the Sail MV office that week—and shut it down for six weeks.

Looking back, he says it was fortunate that Sail MV had done so much work in the previous year to move its office systems into the cloud. "We certainly weren't planning on a pandemic, but here in the office we'd been moving systems into the cloud for efficiency and cost savings. As it turned out, we were able to close the office because we had so much of our infrastructure online that we could make the transition to working from home."

With the travel ban in place, Nutton knew that the summer staff he'd spent the winter lining up might not be able to come to the United States for a season of instructional work with children on the Lagoon.

"We had everything lined up for 2020," says Nutton. "Staff were in place; visas were being applied for; housing was in place. We knew something was coming, but as late as the middle of March, we were still planning a program for the summer. Then J-1 visa applications were postponed, and I started looking for US residents who might be able to come and work for us. In mid-April, the board decided, correctly, to cancel the summer program. That began the heartbreaking process of sending out emails to everyone on the staff."

Sail MV's fiercely-beloved rowing program was abruptly



Summer days of 2020 on Lagoon Pond: blue skies, fair breezes, distancing—and masks.

curtailed—there simply is no easy way to distance seven people headed out for an hour of exercise in a Cornish pilot gig. And the Vineyard high school varsity sailing team—a team so full of promise for the racing season ahead—suddenly had to cancel all activities after just two practice outings in March.

Coach Andrew Burr says the loss of the racing season was deeply felt, by the team and by himself. For the two seniors, captain Joe Serpa and Abigail Hammarlund, it would have been the culmination of their years racing with the Vineyard team. "Andy (Nutton) and I both missed working with a group of kids that we really enjoy being around," says Burr. "It just would have been so much fun to see that group enjoy the season. We missed that."

Says Nutton, "We were a very, very good team this year—certainly the best team I've known since I came to Sail MV. And the influence we have on these children is two-way: we give a huge amount to these kids, and to see them succeeding is something we get back. When they won the Cape and Islands team racing last year, the joy on their faces when they crossed the line—it was so wonderful. This year, for Joe and the other seniors not to get their time in the sun was genuinely heart-

In 2020, Sail MV Adapted and Evolved

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wrenching, more upsetting than we expected, I think.”

So with the arrival of spring it was clear that Sail MV faced a year unlike any in the organization’s history. And the organization’s leaders, with Sail MV’s mission foremost in mind, began planning how to make the best of it.

“It’s a lot like a sailor who sees storm clouds on the horizon, adjusts his course and takes a reef in,” says Kettlewell. “For Sail MV, that meant figuring out what we could do safely this year. That turned out to be private sailing lessons on the Lagoon. And because we couldn’t provide housing, we used Island instructors exclusively—they were graduates of our Island classes and programs.”

Sail MV’s summer sailing lessons proved a surprising success, with more than 100 people taking part. Says Nutton: “It worked out wonderfully. We ended up giving lessons three days a week, about 300 hours of training in all over the summer. In the end, Sail MV—despite all the things that were thrown up in front of us—did manage to get enough staff in place to do this.”

Another program Sail MV was able to support in 2020 was the summer racing season on Menemsha Pond in Chilmark. “We basically managed to run the program we usually do,” says Nutton—“just without the prize-awarding events. We met in April with Bob Ranalli, the commodore, and told him we’d be able to run their program safely this year. It was a full summer of racing, starting on the first Wednesday of July.”

That left one more big challenge facing Sail MV: the organization’s most important fund-raising event, the annual Seafood Buffet & Auction. No one knew quite how to save that event until John Wilson, a member of the Sail MV board and a television director for ESPN, stepped up and devoted

nearly two months to producing a half-hour online telethon presented in July. The story of that project appears on page four of this newsletter.

This fall, the staff and directors of Sail MV are looking ahead, gaming out possibilities for a summer of 2021 whose prospects still aren’t entirely clear. But already, there are signs that Sail MV’s resiliency and adaptability are beginning to

bring back programs that were so abruptly lost in the spring.

In October, with safety protocols closely supervised by Nutton and Coach Burr, practices and instruction for young

‘One thing we learned this summer is that even with a limited number of instructors and smaller groups, Sail MV can still carry on mission-driven work.’

racing sailors resumed on the Lagoon. Also from the Sail MV boathouse, the rowing program is set to resume with

strict safety guidelines this November. And Andrew Nutton is working remotely with one of the largest enrollments ever in the Maritime Studies program at the regional high school.

“One thing we learned this summer,” says Kettlewell, “is that even with a limited number of instructors and smaller groups, Sail MV can still carry on mission-driven work.”

Through the storms of 2020, the board and staff of Sail MV not only kept their eyes on the mission, but also on their stewardship of this organization that plays such an important role in the life of Martha’s Vineyard. “Sail MV is financially healthy,” says Kettlewell—“in part because we were so careful to cut expenses this year.

“We’ve really come through this crisis in much better shape than we feared when we first faced this in March and thought we might have to close all our summer programs. We were able to

run a successful virtual fund-raising event. Our private lessons were more successful than we expected. We got donations from our loyal supporters in many cases, and we even got some government support as well. I’d say our position now is strong—we’re planning on being back and in something close to full operation in 2021, and there’s nothing I can see now on the horizon that might prevent that from happening.”



Andy Nutton’s summer crew: Joe Serpa, Caleb Burt, and Caroline King.

'It's Time:' Peggy Schwier Is Stepping Down

SAIL MV HAS BEEN through a series of transitions over the past three years, and Peggy Schwier—whose tenure as president of the organization goes back 15 years—didn't want to contribute one more.

Now, she says, it's time: "I've been president for too long." And Dr. Dan Pesch, a member of the Sail MV board for the past decade and its treasurer for the past four years, has agreed to stand for election as president at the organization's annual meeting in January.

"My stepping down has been about a three-year process," Schwier says. "But now (executive director) John Kettlewell is nestled in, and (programs director) Andy Nutton is just shining in his job, and with Dan's willingness to step up to the presidency, I think we're in pretty good shape."

For his part, Kettlewell says he appreciates Schwier's decision to stay on as president through his first year in the executive director's job. "The historic knowledge of the organization that I found here is huge," he says. "There are people I can see every day who can remember what was going on in 1995, people who could explain to me when I'd ask, how did this happen?"

Schwier and Dr. Pesch have had many conversations over recent years and see eye-to-eye on the importance of building an organizational structure that fosters more participation on the part of board members. Sail MV now has a set of working committees responsible for finance, governance, events, education, programs, facilities, development and outreach.

Developing a diverse and muscular board is a priority for both of them. "If we're really going to make all the committees work as Peggy envisions," says Dr. Pesch, "we're going to need strong chairs of those committees."

"Thanks in large part to Peggy," he says, "we have a good plan now going forward. We just need to make it happen."

Dr. Pesch is Chief of Staff at Martha's Vineyard Hospital. He joined the hospital staff in the fall of 2010, moving full-time to the place where he'd spent his summers growing up,

learning to sail at the Vineyard Haven Yacht Club.

Following Schwier's tenure does have its daunting aspects, Dr. Pesch admits. "The thing that's so huge," he says, "is that Peggy knows everyone. The good news is that I know I can pick up the phone and call her at any time. She's going to be invaluable to me—she really has been the glue that holds together all the people of this organization."

Looking ahead, Dr. Pesch starts by

that we can run a safe program next year and take care of your kids."

As she looks to the end of her tenure as president, Peggy Schwier recalls first being attracted to Sail Martha's Vineyard by the spirit of the organization's signature summer event, the Seafood Buffet & Auction. She attended and enjoyed that celebration for many years, she recalls, before joining the board in 2004. She laughs now as she recalls how Rick Brew invited her onto the board, telling her, "It's not a big



Peggy Schwier has led Sail MV through a decade and a half of growth and accomplishments.

expressing his gratitude for the generosity of Sail MV's supporters. "We're in a good financial position," he says. "Are we absolutely secure?—of course not. Public access sailing programs across the country all have their struggles—I've seen this all my life, in programs from Chicago to Texas and Florida. They're all doing great stuff and they all struggle to make ends meet, skating along on small donations and the force of people's passions."

"But Sail MV has been very responsibly managed, even through this difficult year. We've proven that we're an organization you can trust in giving your dollars to. And we're confident, after all the hard work of this summer,

deal—just a meeting every so often."

Two years later she was president, succeeding John Christensen, Matthew Stackpole and Joe Hall.

Schwier is proud of the way Sail MV has evolved over the past 15 years into a mature organization, with governing and working structures that have emerged and strengthened as needed.

"If there's one achievement I would want to point to," she says, "it is that I have worked to change this organization from something people saw as being the work of one or two people into something people looked at and saw—us. Sail MV is about people working together."

‘Our Stories’ — As Told by John Wilson

JOE SERPA, CAPTAIN of the high school varsity sailing team, recounts how Sail MV inspired him to seek a college degree in naval architecture. Brothers Tristan and Connor Lodge, both riggers at MV Shipyard, discuss the essential role Sail MV plays in preserving and celebrating the Island’s maritime heritage. Matthew Stackpole, a founder and former president of Sail MV, speaks of how oceans connect us all and tells how Sail MV provides life-enriching experiences to young people every year.

All these stories, and more, are told in compelling digital video clips created by Sail MV board member and veteran ESPN director John Wilson.

This spring, when it became clear that Sail MV’s usual summer programs would have to be put on hold, Wilson stepped up and put nearly two months of effort into helping the organization tell its story online. “In April,” he says, “we knew we would have to cancel our summer events. With my background in TV production, it seemed like time to put my skills to use and tell some stories about all the ways Sail Martha’s Vineyard impacts both young people and adults on the Vineyard.”

On furlough because ESPN had cut back so much of its sports coverage, he says, “I had time on my hands. I had a camera. And I had some ideas.”

Wilson’s biggest project was to produce a live online event: a 35-minute telethon to take the place of Sail MV’s most important annual fund-raising celebration, the Seafood Buffet & Auction. Wilson went to work on the project in May, preparing short videos on specific aspects of Sail MV’s many programs and gathering material for the online fund-raiser. “In the lead-up to the event,” he recalls, “we were rolling out a new piece every four or five days highlighting a different aspect of what we do.”

From the middle of May right up to the night of the auction on Thursday, July 9, the project was all-consuming for Wilson. “Over six weeks,” he says, “I probably put in about 350 hours of work. I learned a lot about Sail MV, and I learned a lot about myself.

“In so much of my work, my approach has been, ‘Here, I’m going to tell my story about this.’ What this project really seared into my brain is that I wasn’t telling my story, I was telling other people’s stories.”

Wilson ended up doing 46 interviews and gathering some

1,500 images and more than 15 hours of supporting footage.

Along the way, Wilson says: “I learned a lot about all the different ways Sail MV has impact. And I was so struck by the generosity of the people who gave their time to work with me. If people hadn’t been willing to sit down for these interviews, it wouldn’t have been possible to do what we did. I’m very grateful for that.” He’s also grateful, he says, to MVTN, the Island’s local television station, for making its studio available for this project.



John Wilson conducts an interview for his video series at Sailing Camp Park.

One of his favorite interviews, Wilson says, was with Rick Brew, one of the founders of Sail MV. “I loved it when he said that every kid who grows up on the Island deserves the chance to get in a boat—and to fall out of a boat.”

Wilson is a big fan of Andrew Nutton, Sail MV’s programs director, whom he first persuaded and then coached to serve as live host for the virtual fund-raiser event in July. “I think we hit a home run in bringing Andy Nutton here,” he says, “and he’s become a good friend of mine.”

The admiration is clearly mutual. “John’s ability to produce professional, well-structured video that presents a real narrative was what made it possible for us to tell Sail MV’s story better than we’ve ever been able to tell it before,” says Nutton. “He actually masterminded the production of our live program for the virtual Seafood Buffet, and it was outstanding.”

Says John Kettlewell, Sail MV’s executive director: “To have someone on our board with those abilities, who was willing to give up so much time, was just huge. He rightfully deserves all the plaudits he gets.”

In a Challenging Year for Sail MV, Diversity Emerged as a New Focus



Coach Andrew Burr instructs young sailors at Sailing Camp Park.

WHEN OUT SAILING with my wife, Leslie, she often reminds me that the time to reef the sails is when I first think about it, not after being forced to by a raging wind. One of the most important and earliest lessons I learned on the water is to go with the flow of the weather, despite whatever plans you might have, while at the same time being prepared for whatever might come along.

This year, Sail MV decided to take in that early reef by cancelling regular summer classes, rowing programs, and in-person fundraising events. In March we closed our office and began working remotely. We searched for and obtained alternative means of financing, cut expenses wherever possible, and reduced our workforce. As when out on the water, the primary goal was to make sure that everyone remained safe and healthy, with a secondary goal of remaining true to our mission. Despite having to take drastic action, we focused on how to get back on course to our destination.

As often happens on a boat, the immediate crisis of reefing our sails was accompanied by other unforeseen difficulties requiring action. As the pandemic raged, the deaths of George Floyd and Breonna Taylor and subsequent protests once again reminded us all of the systemic racism that has cursed our country. Black Lives Matter signs appeared all over the Island, and here at Sail MV we were reminded that sailing is a very “white” sport. Yes, even here on the Vineyard in a small nonprofit dedicated to getting youth out on the water, we need to do better to make diversity and equity inherent in our programs.

Sail MV has always welcomed all comers to our programs. Some don’t realize that we offer many of our programs to Island youth at no charge. Each summer we provide more than \$120,000 in programming if we were to charge for it. However, the Board and staff have learned that it is not enough to be passively welcoming. We know that we must be more intentional in extending that welcome to all communities on the island.

As part of this process, we have been taking many opportunities to get educated on how other nonprofit organizations, both within and outside of the boating and sailing community, have worked to improve diversity at all levels. We are doing a lot of listening, and we don’t have all the answers. We are actively recruiting diverse members on our Board and staff, and we will work to promote our programs to people we don’t ordinarily reach. This won’t happen overnight, but it will now be an important touchstone in everything Sail MV does.

These efforts will further strengthen Sail MV, and will better prepare us for whatever weather comes over the horizon. Thanks, as always, for your support.

John J. Kettlewell
Executive Director

Thank You for Supporting Sail Martha's Vineyard

SAIL MARTHA'S VINEYARD depends on generous donations from individuals, foundations, corporations, small businesses, and government grants. We are extremely grateful for every donation, whether it is an in-kind gift of goods and services, or a monetary contribution. The following individuals and organizations made monetary donations. We apologize for any omissions.

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SUMMER PROGRAMS SIGNUP

Registration for Sail MV's 2021 summer sailing programs will open on January 11. Visit our website to sign up for instructional programs on the Lagoon.

SAIL MARTHA'S VINEYARD WINTER LECTURE SERIES BEGINS IN DECEMBER

The speakers and their maritime stories are real this year, though the programs will be virtual.

Our 2020-2021 program season begins on Wednesday, Dec. 9, when Bruce Strickrott presents a 6:30 p.m. Zoom program on WHOI's famous submersible, the *Alvin*. Other programs in this series were being arranged as this newsletter went to press; dates are as follows:

Wednesday, Jan. 13, 2021

Wednesday, Feb. 10, 2021

Wednesday, March 10, 2021

For tickets to these programs, visit sailmv.org.



SAVE THE DATES!

30th Annual Seafood Buffet & Auction:
July 8, 2021 (*live or virtual*)

Vineyard Cup Regatta: July 10-11, 2021