

Documentary “Sailors first”

Herb: (on) I've been sailing since I've been about ten years old which is close to sixty-two years. You can do the addition but I'm getting to be one of the old souls of the sea around here.

Ed: (on) I moved out to San Francisco twenty-five years ago. I grew up on a lake in Michigan and I've been sailing all my life.

Greg: (on) I've been sailing for a little over two years and it is my passion.

John: (on) Being with other people, being able to independently take the boat out on the bay, being out in nature.

Dylan: (on) I'm a big sportsman and so sailing is a sport that I enjoy doing and learning to do better.

Henrik: (on) San Francisco Bay is the end of a bunch of rivers, and it flows like a river. When the tide comes in, it might come in the other way, but it will eventually start going back out. At the gate it can be really serious.

Henrik: (on) Hold the gate.

Henrik: (off) My name is Henrik Hartz and I'm a paraplegic. I've been a paraplegic for about fifteen years now.

Henrik: (on) It's pickin' up, isn't it?

John: (on) It is.

Henrik: (on) Hey John, go flip.

Henrik: (off) I had a bicycle accident. Standard ten speed bicycle road bike. Took a bad spill, no cars, no nothing. Just one second I was doing fine and the next second they were stroking me off the road, put me in an ambulance and I haven't stood up since. But I didn't let that get me down.

John: (off) In 1973 I was riding a bicycle to work one day and a car hit me head on. A lady had swerved to miss a cat and shot across the road and there I was. And as a result, I became paraplegic. My first sailing experience was really exhilarating for me. I was really, impressed with how easy it was to sail. I think, it was kind of beyond belief that I could go out and sail a boat with very little assistive devices. It was a great experience.

John: (on) OK, here we go, all yours.

John: (on) We gonna fall off or come up?

Henrik: (on) We gonna fall off a little.

John: (on) OK. So that little be ok?

Henrik: (on) Something like that.

John: (on) I don't feel that I personally am a cripple. I am a person with a physical disability and if there is obstacles in my life I look to or toward overcoming them. And I deal with people in situations where you can overcome the obstacle. So, yeah, I don't like to be referred to as a cripple cause I don't see myself this way.

Herb: (on) I had a sticker at the back of my wheelchair which said "sailors have more fun". One of the shoppers came up behind me and said "Are you a sailor?" and I said "Well, I used to be.". He said "We have a group that meets at South Beach Harbor once a month and it's called the Bay Area Association of Disabled Sailors. And maybe you would like to come back and try to go sailing with us. I've known Lawrence Cornfield since 1994 and he was responsible for getting me back on the bay sailing.

Lawrence: (on) The most important thing about getting people out sailing is actually to get down to the boat and get into the boat. So we had this really wonderful sling that we hoisted you up and swayed you aboard. But I can just remember how you didn't have much muscle ton. You have a lot of muscle ton now. You were not very mobile. In fact not mobile at all.

Herb: (off) But I remember you strapped my hand to the tiller with a belt.

Lawrence: (off) That's right. You were not very optimistic when we were starting to do this thing. You didn't think this lift will gonna work, you didn't think the boat was gonna work, you didn't think you'll gonna be able to sailing it. And after about ten minutes in the boat you ...

Herb: (off) I was sailing.

Lawrence: (off) ... yeah, you were there. That changed the whole picture.

Herb: (off) That was very apprehensive going down the dock, because the dock was rocking and here the boat also. I've got used to this wheelchair and a little bit security. And all time you guys throw me on the boat again. But then I sailed that day and then you said to me we have a race in Chicago in August and we need to know if I could represent the club sail.

Lawrence: (off) You were a premier sailor before you were injured. We needed people who knew how to sail and you had some other problems to overcome. You knew how to sail. And I remember, we went to Chicago. That was a phenomenal experience. BAADS was founded in the east bay in Oakland at the Lake Merritt Facility. It wasn't really an adaptive program, not therapeutic. It was really a recreational program, but very limited in scope, and a few people who were in that program decided they were trying take it on to the saltwater at the bay.

Herb: (on) I've got an active in racing myself and I've sailed in disabled sailing events in Canada, in Victoria, in Vancouver in the disability cup. I've competed in the independence cup which is our US sailings national championship. And I've even gone over to Australia to compete in an international regatta, in the Access Dingies. I did that two years ago which I finished seventh out of about eighty-four skippers. The worst thing that happened to me of course is my sailing experience when I was injured. I was sailing on San Francisco Bay on a fifty-foot sailboat and handing the lines and the skipper asked me to ease the genoa sheet and I

went forward to do that. Then something happened, either the winch failed or something happened, and I was yanked forward. And as I went forward I could not break my fall and end up hitting something on the cockpit floor and snapped my neck back and ended up on the cockpit floor quadriplegic. Matter of a second or two and I was changed, changed my life.

Well, another thing that was really wonderful for my ... I got a lot of support from the sailing organizations. I was member of the Quintin Yacht Club and the San Francis Yacht Club. Both the yacht clubs really helped out and were very helpful in my recovery. And also I sang with a group, or still sing with a group called "The Sons Of The Sea", better knows as the SOTS. It's a group about eight-teen men that get together every monday night at the San Francis Yacht Club. And I've been singing with them probably for four or five years before my injury and my fellow SOTS came to visit my at the hospital. And then on my first day out of the hospital I was in a red convertible with this nice lady who took my for a ride. And they literally lifted my out of the red convertible into a wheelchair at the yacht club and brought me inside to sing at the rehearsal with the guys. But those types of things really kept me in tune and kept me going with the important things of my life plus the true friendships that really came through. And they really supported me when I needed them.

Dan: (on) To me it's a club of sailors, first and foremost. People join us to learn to sail, they get better at sailing or because, in my case for instance, it's a passion and BAADS is the way I can do it. I really begin to appreciate that my thirty years on this bay and my skill and experience with sailboats was more important to everybody than anything I could or could not do physically. I must sail with all the other sailors and usually when we're on the boat we're not talking about civil rights or the laws or even what we do for living or even we don't talk much about our disabilities. Cerebral palsey means some of the muscles motor nerves in my brain didn't develop like everybody elses. I'm not saying abnormal, because it is normal to me. And my right arm and my right leg are smaller and weaker and somewhat spastic than my left. If I didn't have BAADS? What would I do? I probably wouldn't be sailing because my body isn't up to doing everything on a boat itself and BAADS gives me the opportunity to sail on boats that are adapted to people with disabilities and BAADS gives me the chance to express my skill in a sport I've been doing for a very long time, without feeling like I have to be able to do everything to be a success. And that's really good. Empowerment I guess is the word.

Ed: (on) I came down with the ciglio-meglio virus about seven years ago. And it affected the wetness of my eyes and I've been increasently going blind over the last seven years. I've had to learn how to sail all over again because when you're sighted you can pick out a mark on the horizon and head forward and you can see the sail and how the boat is affected on the water. When you loose your eyesight you have to depend on your other senses. So you have to feel the pressure in your ears, the sun and the wind on your face and the action of the tiller.

Tell me if I'm in the center. I can't see where I'm going.

When I first went blind I had to tap my way around the city. When I was on land I had to go inch by inch, foot by foot. And so I had to concentrate on what I was falling into holes and getting in trouble on the street. And when I started sailing, learning how to sail again blind, I didn't have to worry inch by inch or foot by foot. I only had to worry about where the freighters and where the bridges were. And so it let me have that so much more freedom of movement and thought. And now I have this wonderful guide dog and I'm teaching her

how to sail and I think she's getting to be a great old sea dog.

I joined BAADS three years ago. It's a wonderful organization for people with disabilities to be able to get them out on an equal basis with the other sailing community. You can do that in a sailboat, but you can't do that on land, if you're in a wheelchair, using a cane walking down the street. You're on equal footing as it were with anybody else out there racing or sailing.

The irony of being a sailor in San Francisco Bay and being able to navigate the bay with no problems is pretty ironic when you can't get across the Embarcadero because of no audible signals. Trying to get to the boats is still taking your life in your hands. At the two muni stops where you get of the subway Brannan and Second Street trying to get across the Embarcadero is really dangerous.

<race preparation>

Dylan: (on) I first started to sail in the summer of 1994 in Chicago with the Zep Goldman adaptive sailing program. My favorite part about sailing is sailing with acquaintances I know, friends, able bodied persons. My main sport right now is wheelchair track and that is my greatest challenge. Well, you do the same distances as able bodied track which is 100 meters to a marathon and now that there's a para Olympics which is a disabled version of the Olympics, you get pretty much the same venues. I have been to the 1988 para Olympics and have a relay gold medal. My goal for the 2004 Athens para Olympics is to get an individual gold medal in one of the track disciplines. What attracted me to sailing with BAADS was simply the opportunity to sail in the San Francisco Bay area.

Jim: (on) Hi, I'm Jim Thweatt. I actually sail on the Alpha team with Dylan Young, Gibb Right, as well as a couple crew members, Greg Williams. We're sailing here in San Francisco Bay, trying to be competitive with the able bodied teams. I lost my leg at the age of seventeen. So I actually started learning how to ski before I got my first prosthesis made. I like to say, I learned how to ski before I learned how to walk again.

Actually when I was seventeen years old, I was riding a motorcycle, I got broadsided by a car. I call it a road dispute with a red old large Pontiac. It pinned my leg between the bike and the car, broke my foot and crashed my lower leg. At the age of seventeen I went from being an athlete to being physically disabled.

Greg: (on) My name is Gregory A. Williams. I am a disabled sailor. I was a structural iron worker in Dallas, Texas. My job was a connector, one of those crazy characters that walked around on the beams, on the high-rises and put the beams and the columns in place, actually built the superstructure of the building. About 1:30 in the afternoon on June 26th 1982 I got knocked off the building and I fell seven stories to the ground. The fall was very interesting, but the landing was a bit of a mess. I became a paraplegic that afternoon. I had a three compound fractures in my right leg, exploded my hip, fractured my pelvis, broke six ribs on my right side, punctured my lung, several of the nerves in this arm, broke my jaw – it was a very interesting afternoon. The first time I went sailing I was in Queensland, Australia on the Goldcoast. The wind was about twenty knots. When we moved away from the docks and the wind caught those sails, the boat just flew, at least it felt like it was flying.

My face was next to the water because the boat was really heeled. The adrenaline started pumping through my body and I felt alive. I've always been very competitive, wanted to do it better than the next person. And do whatever I have to to be better than the next person. That's what drives me. Being the best. I don't mind not winning but just makes me work that much harder and practice more. So that the next time I meet the person that beat me I can follow him, take his wind and bury him. How do I react to people that don't think that I'm capable of doing the things that an able bodied person is? Nuts to you! I can do anything and when I get that kind of reaction from somebody I make it my business to show them how wrong they are. Not only about me, but about people in general with disabilities. I'm maybe short, but my heart is big. I have accomplished a lot of things in my life and I'm not done.

Jim: (off) I think that everybody has the right to live their life the way they see necessary. I think that people are happier when they engage life and take on the challenges. Everybody has got his challenges. I think that to be engaged is to be part of life.

Dylan: (off) There's probably been lots of people who've been disabled and sailing for years and years and years. They just had their own boats they owned it, they went out, no big deal. What's different or unique about a program BAADS, or some of the ones I'm sighting, is that they are centered around people with disabilities and giving opportunities to sail. But there's been hundreds of years of people who are disabled, you can imagine the pirate with the wooden leg, he's essentially disabled, but we have this image this icon of someone disabled whose always been sailing and we never thought about it! I was just thinking about that for the first time right now!

Well in the United States, the governing bodies for sailing on the international competitive level is US Sailing and in my experience, compare to other sports, they are very well integrated in terms of accepting disabled sailing into their national governing movement.

With a disability there is still a time lag.. With an able bodied person they might be able to grab a line the moment they think about it where I need to plan, so it's about even. For me to give a command to somebody to do a line is about the same for me to get the energy up to grab a line firmly and pull it.

Everyone has to adapt to their own unique style. Able bodied, disabled, doesn't matter, there is a little tweak that you gotta figure out for yourself that's gonna make you more efficient. So in that context, being disabled doesn't matter at all. Because even the world champion able bodied sportsman has to make custom changes to their set up and their way of looking at competing and it's an adjustment that anyone has to make.

I was disabled at birth so it affects my life every day.

I don't know. My daily challenges are like anybody else's. Do I have money? Do I have love in my life? You know? Is what I'm doing satisfying to myself? That's my daily challenges.

Herb: (on) There's a lot of thought that goes into a race. When does the starting line to be on? What sort of courses are favored? So many things that you think about that were part of the game.

<race>

- Jim: (on) We actually picked up the past three boats at the first mark. But unfortunately we got blown over because Dylan got knocked out at the sea. We rounded up and ended up not doing as well as we would like to. But it was the first race of the season, so we were happy with the fact that we are able to compete. All in all it was a good day.
- Ed. (off) I have an acquaintance who is disabled in a chair and some stranger came up to him and said "Well, if I were like you, I would kill myself.". And the disabled friend of mine said "If I was like you, I would kill myself."
- Jim: (off) It's tougher. It's a tougher lifestyle. Either as an athlete or in society. Because there are a certain number of prejudices that come along with people not knowing what you can do or what you can't do. So the disabled individual is really in charge of their life and has to do the best that they can with the tools that they have.
- Henrik: (off) When I was in the hospital a close family friend came to visit. He said to me "You were handed a really lousy deck of cards here.". I thought "Yeah, you're right.". And after he left I had some time to really think about that. And I thought "You know, maybe I was handed a lousy deck of cards. But it really depends on what do I do with them. You get a lousy hand and you can still be the winner."
- Ed: (on) Pity is a four letter word – And I don't use it.

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