



In the tall ship rigging



Sisters Under Sail

A unique all female tall ship sail training program

By Susan Peterson Gately

Dawn Santamaria grew up in the suburbs of Chicago and even after nearly 30 years of living in New Jersey, she considers herself a heartlander. Yet a dream that would not be denied and a family business drew her to saltwater. It happened when Dawn Santamaria's spouse, Jay, suffered a midlife crisis, one that shifted her own life onto a new course. He bought a boat, a really big one.

The Unicorn was a steel topsail schooner 118 feet long and rigged with 11 sails. At first while the Santamarias took care of some much needed maintenance and restoration for the 60 plus year old vessel, she served as a private yacht, sailed by Jay, Dawn, their four teenaged daughters, and a small crew.

But while out there at sea, Dawn Santamaria saw something very special taking place. Her daughters were becoming strong self assured young women, at ease with themselves and others. When they went off to college, they were far more mature and ready to handle the challenges of a diverse and changing world than she herself had been at that age.

She saw, as she puts it, a mission for herself and for the family ship "staring me in the face." So she founded Sisters Under Sail and began operating an all female tall ship sail training program run exclusively by women for women and girls.

History of the Unicorn

Sailors agree that the sailing ship has always been one of the most beautiful and compelling objects ever created by humans.

Everyone is drawn to a tall ship's lofty rig and shapely hull as she floats beside a pier. She is as graceful as a classic work of art, yet strong and authentic, crafted to withstand gales and huge waves at sea. It is this absolute authenticity and integrity that make her such a good instruction tool for character building.

And, there's a long history of using these vessels for youth training, in fact for more than a century. Today dozens of tall ships in North America, on salt and freshwater alike, are working ships, teaching about life and leadership skills. But no one had ever attempted to run an all female tall ship program before the Santamarias launched Sisters Under Sail.

The Unicorn was launched in 1947 as a Dutch built fishing vessel. She worked in the North Atlantic trawl fishery for 32 years before she was sold and converted to sail. By 1979, she had acquired a new name and identity as the schooner Eenhorn, Dutch for "unicorn." In 1986 an American bought her and sailed her as a charter vessel and treasure seeker in the West Indies and along the Spanish coast.

Several more changes of hands brought her to North America, where a Canadian couple did a thorough refit of rig, hull and power plant to allow certification as a Canadian sail training ship. Renamed True North of Toronto she sailed the Great Lakes and saltwater for several seasons before the Santamarias purchased her. After yet another extensive refit, she was granted U.S. registry and got back her original name.



Left: Julianne Palm, 15, plots her course in the chart room.

Below: Amanda Perrin, 18, from Medina, Ohio, works a yard.



How It Works

There were plenty of skeptics among the old (mostly male) shellbacks of the tall ship community when Sisters Under Sail first launched. But Santamaria persevered, and her summer programs for teenaged girls have sold out since the first season five years ago. For some of her early programs, she teamed up with her alma mater, St. Mary's College of Notre Dame, Ind., to do all woman cruises on Lake Michigan. She continues to work with the college and with Notre Dame University, offering leadership training to students and alumni. When the young women come aboard the big steel schooner they find themselves in a strange environment surrounded by strange people, one that's more than a little uncomfortable. For some of the girls, it's downright scary.

So the all female crew immediately provides a safe and supportive learning environment. No boys are aboard to impress or flirt with, and there's less opportunity to hide behind one's "inadequacies" as a mere girl when you're working with a female captain or first mate.

The *Unicorn's* crew of professional tall ship mariner educators sizes up the new recruits and assigns tasks that play to their strengths, so the girls will quickly be successful.

"If we have a stronger girl who wants to climb, then she'll go aloft or out on the jib boom," Santamaria said. "If we have a more academic girl, she might excel at navigation."

Santamaria said she thought that the ship's heavy gear and sails naturally promote cooperation and leadership. The new crew has to use strategic thinking and teamwork rather than brute strength.

"We teach them the three Cs: Communication, cooperation, and collaboration, and we really drive that lesson home."

Without boys around, a lot of tension disappears and by the end of the week, Santamaria said, "It's golden. We have a well balanced team. The girls excel at their jobs and have demonstrated their strengths."

The heart of the program is the daily group discussion.

During this time, the girls translate their seafaring lessons aboard ship into inward voyages of self discovery, at the end of each day's voyaging after the *Unicorn* is brought conversation and journaling, they gain insights and self awareness. The young women make the connection between their experiences while at sea and real life lessons. Those lessons might include the value of authentic teamwork, courage in overcoming fears, no contribution

too small, and staying on the right course as they sail life's uncertain seas.

A ship on a voyage is a perfect metaphor for life itself, Santamaria told me during a phone interview.

"You prepare for the cruise, you hone your skills, but after you set out the unexpected happens. Winds shift and storms rise, and you have to deal with it," she explained.

After all, as boaters who have taken landlubber friends on an overnight cruise well know, boats and sailing are magnifiers of human relationships. To experience true growth, we must assume risk. Even just a week aboard the *Unicorn* teaches lessons of responsibility, self respect and respect for others that last a lifetime.

What Crewmembers Take Away

I wonder if perhaps our view of a ship itself as feminine adds its own energy to the Sisters Under Sail program. The sailing ship herself reassures and inspires her company, as she feels her way through the waves, patient, enduring and always working in collaboration with her crew. The big schooner's young crew members quickly realize they must support and care for their ship if she is to do the same for them.

They work as a team out on the wide waters. The discipline, sacrifices, and demands of a sea voyage yield rich rewards. A week aboard the *Unicorn* teaches women and youngsters alike, as they become one of the tightest and closest of all possible communities – a good crew on a ship at sea.

"I've learned that my life is up to me," a 16 year old wrote in her journal.

Another trainee wrote to Santamaria, "I want to thank you for helping me overcome many of my fears. Your ship is beautiful and your crew is awesome."

In fact, the young people were having so much fun that Sisters Under Sail started offering some cruises for mothers and other older women, too.

Although I've never sailed on a tall ship, about 30 years ago I walked up the gangplank of a Russian fishery vessel wondering how I would possibly survive the next two weeks of garlic, stand-up toilets, and no English. To this day I treasure the experience.

The kindness of men and women aboard that ship changed my view of the world which might be why the teens' testimonials on the *Unicorn's* Website absolutely ring true for me. The impact of making a sea voyage as a working crew member is enduring and often profound. At a time when girls seem to spend more money and attention than ever on surface beauty, yet end feeling worse than ever about themselves, Sisters Under Sail is a breath of fresh sea air. The real-world accomplishments of sailing a tall ship and making a sea passage build true self-esteem, confidence, and strength.

The *Unicorn* teaches lessons that stay with the girls for life.



Founder Dawn Santamaria

