



A STAR TO STEER HER BY

Teenagers learn more than sailing on a tall ship voyage

BY JOJO
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"I CAN'T GO ANY HIGHER."

My legs were shaking. My body was pressed to the shrouds. The STV *Unicorn* seemed to sway and quake beneath me, despite the fact that we were safely tied to the dock in Greenport, Long Island. The first mate, Ms. Baum, peered up at me from the deck, 30 feet below. Tami, another member of the adult crew, was close behind me on the rigging. Her voice floated up to me. "Fear is just an emotion, like happy or sad. Acknowledge it, but it's up to you whether or not you act on it."

So began five days of self-improvement, self-discovery, and learning upon the *Unicorn*, a beautiful 118-foot-long tall ship, on a voyage from Long Island, N.Y., to Boston, Massachusetts. I was one of six high-school girls who were welcomed aboard the *Unicorn* by Dawn Santamaria, owner of the tall ship and founder of Sisters Under Sail, and the all-female crew, led by Captain Tiffany.

With her short blond hair and wide and welcoming smile, Dawn exuded a strong sense of calm self-confidence, and comfort immediately washed over us. She explained that this journey was going to be more than a passage from New York to Boston Harbor. Armed with questionnaires about our values, characteristics, and learning styles, she began her mission to apply the physical lessons we learned on board to our everyday lives, and turn what would otherwise merely be an awesome adventure into a life-changing program of self-development. Throughout the voyage, the trainees met in Dawn's cabin and talked about the trip, the lessons learned, and how they applied in our lives at home. We bared our souls in her saloon, and she gave us invaluable advice about how to make the right choices along the rocky road of adolescence. I will never forget the wise words she gave us, and she will always be one of the strong, independent women I will look up to and aspire to be like in my life.

Our voyage began with a brutal 0700 start, followed by safety training and a familiarization session with the rig—which I did not climb. With trepidation and growing excitement the other trainees

and I carefully coiled lines and unfurled sails, reefing the mainsail while exploring unfamiliar words like peak and throat, topping lift and downhaul. We were, with sheer woman-power, to sail this 118-foot ship from Greenport Long Island to Martha's Vineyard.

Boat language, from a musical perspective, is set in a strong, steady, two-beat pattern; up and down over the waves, heave-ho on the lines, the continuous call and response of crew and captain. Only two out of six of the trainees had ever sailed before, and it all seemed above our heads as we were sent to various lines and watched as our arms raised sail after sail.

On that first sail, our job was to learn, pull what we were told to pull, and above all else, communicate. At first it seemed almost comical that upon hearing "Haul away Halyard!" we were supposed to respond "Haul away Halyard, Aye!" Many pirate jokes ensued.

Soon the *Unicorn* was cruising along with four sails up, cutting lazily through the fog while I lay with two other girls in the hammock-like netting beneath the bowsprit, the jib soaring above us and the surf rolling beneath us. My hands were beginning to ache—by the end of the week they would be calloused—but it was with pride that I rubbed them together to ease the pain.

That night, we weathered a thunderstorm that came from nowhere; the rain fell fast as we rushed to lower the sails, and I found myself yelling back to the wheelhouse like a regular seadog as I threw my weight onto slowly relenting lines and the waves crashed over the gunwales and onto my shoes.

By the time we got to Vineyard Haven, the six strangers who had fallen into their bunks together 48 hours earlier were close friends. That evening they urged me on as I finally found the courage to climb the first section of that immensely tall



JoJo works up the courage to climb the mast on the 118-foot tall ship, *Unicorn*

mast. Later that night, I was roused and dragged up on deck for a two-hour anchor watch to make sure we weren't drifting, which involved checking the engine room, GPS, radar, wind speed and direction, bearings, and the boat in general. It was a tribute to how much we had learned that two girls with three days' experience were the only ones awake, the safety of a ship and its crew resting in our sleepy hands.

And as the last day arrived, it was we trainees who prepared the ship for docking in Boston, who gave the orders and struck the sails and readied the docklines. ♫

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