

*Sometimes in Life, the stars seem to align just so and you discover you're right where you are meant to be, such is the case with Karen Hunt, the new Executive Director of the Milwaukee Community Sailing Center. Her career path and acquired skills have made for a smooth transition as she takes over the helm from Peter Rieck who held the position for 30 years. Impressive statistic: this organization has taught 15,000 adults how to sail.*

*Sail America members will have an opportunity to see this wonderful organization first hand during the conference to be held there May 31-June 2 of 2017, by way of introduction we interview Karen Hunt to see just what MCSC is up to these days.*

*In September 2016, you became the new Executive Director, it must be exciting yet daunting?*

*It has only been a few months now and I am pleased to have the opportunity to tell you a little bit about the MCSC and sailing in Milwaukee.*

*The organization was in transition after the departure of the executive director, who held the position for such a long period and really had a lot of knowledge and really grew this organization. I can't even tell you how fortunate I feel to be the Executive Director. I plan to keep it focused on its mission, balancing the financial needs with the needs of the members and the community we serve because we are really a unique asset here in Milwaukee. The incredible staff here is like family, so supportive of the organization. In my research, I discovered for example, that last year we had over 3800 hours of volunteer time during our short sailing season. Our program director Holly Davenport Church, who is also a relief captain on the S/V Denis Sullivan, Milwaukee's signature schooner, is a remarkably talented woman who brings a lot of that knowledge that we lost with Peter leaving, it really is a great group of people.*

*What is your background?*

*I have been sailing since I was a child. When I moved to Milwaukee for school and I realized sailing here meant I didn't have to tack so much because of Lake Michigan, I thought, "wow this is beautiful ". Though I moved away several times, I always continued to sail. I was on a crew in Central Wisconsin and raced inland on E Scows and did fairly well. I moved back to Milwaukee in 1988 and have not left Lake Michigan since; it's a beautiful area in spite of our winters. I hear there are some people who do ice boat sailing, which sounds like fun, but I am a little fearful of falling into the water!*

*I have a business background; I worked for Chrysler Motors as a young professional and then moved on to be a broker for Morgan Stanley for a number of years. After raising my family, I transitioned back into the workforce in the non profit area and worked for an environmentally friendly, focus on community development organization called the Center for Resilient Cities, I was the Development and Communications Director. Recently I completed my MBA. Everything just fell into place with my business background, my non- profit background, the focus on taking businesses to the next level on my MBA program and the needs of the organization, the timing was perfect. I feel like I have fallen into the right place and I feel privileged.*

*What is the mission of the Milwaukee Community Sailing Center?*

*Our mission is to make the sport of sailing accessible to anyone who really has an interest in learning how to sail, regardless of their physical ability or their financial needs or their age. We make our membership affordable to people, it ranges from youth membership at \$100 per year, to adult full membership which is \$325 yearly. We also offer a family membership, or 2 adults, that would be \$515. If you are brand new to the sport of sailing, tack on another \$160 and you get a beginners lesson, at the end of which you are rated on ability to handle the boat.*

*It might be a light air rating, which is 0 to 10 knots or medium air rating 10-15 knots, heavy air 15 to 20knots and then we go black flag and no one*

*goes out! Once you are rated, you can come to our facility and any time we have open sailing, which is Saturday through Friday from 1PM to sunset in season. You can check out a boat and bring your friends along because we know that you have the skill to hand the conditions. Milwaukee is graced with an inner harbor so we might say that you need to stay in the inner harbor, depending on conditions and not outside the break wall. Or we might say the conditions are wonderful, go wherever and go exploring. Members take out boats for - hour increments, it is a first come, first serve basis. But if out there and enjoy themselves we ask them to check in with us on the radio and if no one waiting they are welcome to stay out longer on the water.*

*We have people who use this facility a lot. The three people who used our facility the most last season, were all women and between them they spent 249 hours on the water in one season and our season runs from the first of May till the last weekend in October, we try to get the most out of it. These women have formed great friendships and understand the healing nature of being on the water.*

*Our off season in winter is spent by holding classes every Tuesday and Thursday evening, these classes range in topics from how to tie sailor knots to how to approach a mooring. We sometimes have the Coast Guard come in and hold a class and we also encourage members to attend our Lunch on the Lake series, about 12 classes from January through March, where they are invited to bring along a bag lunch and hear about the latest news on Lake Michigan. This year our discussions are about the plans for the lighthouse at the end of the lake. So you see our intent is to educate people about Lake Michigan through the sport of sailing.*

*Do you have specific programs geared to the handicap, or women and youth?*

*Of the 72 boats available to members, we have some with handicap adapted sail equipment, however currently we need to replace our hoyster lifts so that we can help the physically challenged. In the past we have had*

*a national sailing event for physically challenged individuals working in conjunction with the Milwaukee Yacht Club and we also work with South Shore Yacht Club. We look forward next season to further collaboration to do more competitive sailing. Everything we do here involves collaboration, including working with the Pewaukee Yacht Club; the Pewaukee County Parks owns the land that is our site. We are very involved with social services, every Friday busloads of special need individuals come to the center, we touch lives in a very unique way.*

*For the last 8 years we have held the Women Regional Conference, a 3-day program with workshops in marine subjects and provide the opportunity to go sailing. This year in the off-season we are expanding our STEMward program. It is a process that ties the principals of math and sciences to the mechanics of sailing and is currently offered to middle school students as part of their classroom curriculum. An instructor goes into the classroom and teaches students the principals of buoyancy, the geometry of sails and aerodynamics and the final expedition is a trip down to the sailing center where they get to apply everything they've learned by doing some sailing. The program is based on the US sailing curriculum. Carolyn Joyce who is on our board, is a program designer and she is modifying the program so that it will be our signature program, an interactive project based learning experience. We are expanding the program this coming school year working in collaboration with Discovery World, another one of our water neighbors, they will be complimenting our sail program with their water exhibits.*

*I've learned that in Milwaukee, more than half of our students in Milwaukee public schools have not even seen Lake Michigan. So for us to provide a pathway to change is both rewarding and exciting to me, that is why I was interested in this position.*

*Harken is located nearby in Pewaukee, just a 45 minute ride inland and they have been a wonderful friend to us here at the center. Peter Harken*

*recently joined our board of directors. If it was not for some of the great names in the sailing community, people like Richard Pieper who has circumnavigated the world, covering over 54,000 nautical miles in his sailboat, an Alden 50 named Agape, Buddy and Gloria Melges, Peter and Olaf Harken, we would probably not have come this far. They really helped us in the early stages in 1979, when this small group of dedicated sailors started working with Pewaukee County parks in an effort to make sailing accessible to everyone on this beautiful lake. They put up a trailer one year, then added a small building and a garage, this was all spearheaded by people who really understand how this sport has a unique balance of everything that we need to be successful in life; leadership, team building and then throw in the excitement of harnessing the power of nature, it's a pretty fortunate experience.*

*On November 21st we had an event honoring Olaf Harken here at the sailing center, so many people are interested in what is going on at the company since they have such a presence in the world of sailing. Olaf was generous enough to come with his newly released book, we had a signing and a fireside chat with him and with Peter Harken and Bill Gaggins, Harken's CEO. Buddy and Gloria Melges showed up and they shared their stories, it was a lot of fun. Those guys still have a lot of energy and love of the sport, but boy, did they sound crazy in their youth!*

*So from the humble beginning in a trailer, what does MCSC look like today?*

*We are located on a large expanse of sprawling grass lawn; it is a state of the art building with many of the LEED certificate aspects. Everything we have done has been with a concern for nature. Out front we have a retention pond for rain runoff so that it does not go directly into the lake. Our modest 2 level building is located right on the lake with classrooms and office on the first floor and the second level is devoted to meeting rooms. We can accommodate up to 200 people for special events. On all three sides of the building we have thermal pane windows looking out on*

*Lake Michigan, I never get tired of the ever changing view. We have the area along the main channel with the lake on one side; the main channel out to the lake on the other and on the west side is the dockage that lines the marina. We are open daily in summer, from 8 am to sunset, and 9-5 in winter. MCSC is a combination of an organization, an event venue but it also has a family feeling to it; if someone has a need they tells us and we try to make it happen.*

*It is pretty impressive to hear that MCSC has taught 15,000 adults how to sail, what makes up you fleet?*

*We have 72 boats in our fleet which includes the Ensigns, which are our work horse, they are a deep keel boat and very stable, we have 29 of those and we typically have 16-18 in the water. In addition we have 5, J24, 4 Solings, 4 brand new 420 which are great to advance kids, 10 Hunters, a few different types of Opi- we have 11 JY Opi, and we have 4 standard Opi for kids who are really proficient that will allow them to compete in some of the Youth 1 regattas. We also have a few keel boats too, for individuals who want to experience sailing a big boat, we keep those out on moorings outside of the center, we have a C&C27, named Misty and a C&C 29 named Reliance.*

*What is your membership?*

*We have 655 members; we do have room for growth. Increase in memberships translates to increase revenue, which allows us to increase our staff during the season. The right balance may be 750, which is what I am shooting for during my tenure.*

*We are not a dockage, we don't have slips for rent, we are kind of on the front end of sailing, where someone wants to try sailing but feels, I don't want to own a boat, I don't want to have to deal with it, worry about repairs; but I like to sail. So I want to put all the ownership of a boat on someone else and I just want to come down and have a boat available so I*

*can just jump in and sail away. Usually is it people who are on the front end of their career who are not sure they want to spend money on a boat, and the back end," wow, it's a hassle I don't want to own a boat anymore, but I still want to sail". We have a robust senior citizen membership made up of people who have owned boats in the past but have decided, nope not anymore.*

*We also have a growing millennial group of people; we all have learned by now that the millennials want the experience but they are clever enough to know that they don't want the expense of owning a boat.*

*You have several programs, many geared to encouraging children to get involved with sailing, such as the Prams in the Park, how does that work?*

*We've had the program since 1985 and it has evolved over the years. We solidified our partnership with Discovery World by bringing our prams down to the small little inlet next to Discovery World where there are very few waves. It is calm and protected so that young students, age 8 to 12 years old who have never been in a boat before can get into a boat and feel comfortable and eventually get out into the harbor. It really just teaches kids the basics of sailing, we put 2 kids to a boat after first testing them with one child and an instructor, all instructors are level one US certified instructor sailors, we try to teach safety.*

*MCSC seems to have an active social calendar, what are some of the events?*

*We do have two fund raising events, one is in the Spring, the Sailors Gala which is a silent auction, dinner, basically it is an opportunity for people who have not seen each other all winter to get together, share war stories and we bring them up to date on our programs. Towards the end of August ending out the season, we have a Lobster Boil where we bring in lobsters from the East Coast, have a raffle, just a fun get together. We have a committee made up of volunteers called the Ambassador Committee, they*

*are responsible for things like the Christmas dinner, they organize our spring and fall cleanup and we also have two Full Moon Sails, in the season. It gets people out on the water in the full moon, we've had anywhere from 30-50 sailors participate, if you've never done it, it is very exciting, then when everyone comes in we have a bonfire and beverages. There are a number of other activities, I am still not certain what they all are, and every time I turn around they have some other great idea.*

*What is your racing schedule?*

*We have an arrangement with the neighboring yacht clubs, if someone is a member here and if they own their own boat then they can pay the fee to the Milwaukee Yacht Club or South Shore Yacht Club both have separate Wednesday night race programs and they can participate in those regattas. We do run our own regattas, we have one called the Quarterbarrel Regatta towards the beginning of the season and then in the Fall we have the chili regatta, not only do you have to race but now we get to find out who makes the best chili.*

*And of course every Sunday morning we have our own regatta and with that we do invite the neighboring yacht clubs to participate because they do not have a Sunday morning regatta. So if they have Laser sailors or Soling sailors or others they can join us. We set the course and the race committee and that happens all summer long. We have about 25 sailors out every Sunday morning racing, and on Saturdays we have something else, a Spinnaker Club. When you first start you get a rating, if you have sailing experience and you don't need to take a basic sailing class, you can pay your \$325 and get in the boat with someone and get evaluated on your skill level. Let's say you have not been sailing in awhile and they give you a light wind rating but you are not satisfied with that, and want a higher level, you can sign up to the Spinnaker Club and come down on Saturday morning and that is a free for all, you can go out with someone who is a medium wind rating and that person can help you get further training, we*



*have about 60 people every single Saturday. They get out on the water around 9:30 and back at 12:30 because we need to have the boats ready for Open Sailing that starts at 1PM. We do have a group of members who own Lasers and race on Tuesdays, we alternate running it with the Milwaukee Yacht Club.*

*Our schedule for the coming year looks like the Midseason Championship scheduled for Sunday July 9<sup>th</sup>, usually about 8-15 boats participating. PRHF and Ensign class regatta, typically J/24, Solings, Ensigns. Scheduled for August 5<sup>th</sup> is the Quarter Barrel regatta, which is typically 15 boats, same classes as the Midseason Championships. Our Fall regatta is on September 16<sup>th</sup> and September 17<sup>th</sup> is the Ensign championships, with up to 20 boats participating.*

*What are the lake conditions?*

*We have a lot of east coast sailors come and say oh, what the heck, it's a lake. And then a storm comes up. With the ocean the water rolls, here in a storm because Lake Michigan is 100 miles wide and 300 miles long, the water breaks. So it can get very, very choppy and violent, really crazy in a short time. On the other hand, when the wind is blowing from the west, on our side of the lake, it comes across the land and just sweeps up off the water. Flat waters, beautiful breezes and you can just go for miles and miles. It is not unusual in the summer just to go out for a 20 mile cruise. The water here is a variety of conditions, but most of the time it is very agreeable. The water temperature of course can get a little chilly. Surface temperatures can go up to 70 degrees and the water is usually 56 to 65 degrees. We sometimes get water spouts out there so you have to be vigilant; we monitor the water every hour in the event of storm threats. The range of experience among the sailors here goes from beginner to very experienced.*

*What are your goals for the center?*

*This year we are going through this transition, but we are going to try to grow our STEM program and increase membership. I am doing a series focused on the future on Fridays starting the beginning of the year to get feedback from our membership. Next summer we are really anticipating some visual changes; our old building is going to be transformed into our kids center, a classroom environment, that leaves the main building available for adults and for organizations who might want to host team building experiences. The goal in 2018 is to launch a major capital campaign that will bring phase two into fruition, which includes extending our garage so we have the capability to repair boats indoors and we are hoping it will grow into a boat building or apprenticeship program. We have one of the best little secrets in Milwaukee here, Jared Drake has been with the center for some time, he keeps the fleet looking snappy, does a great job, very nimble, can climb a mast faster than anyone I've seen, he is one of the best fiberglass repair guys in the city. He is quite the accomplished racer too, I haven't quite gotten to the bottom of all of his successes, but I hear he has an impressive racing record.*

*What brings people to have events at MCSC?*

*I think it is our mission, I think people feel good about hosting events here because they know the revenue will be used to further that mission which is to bring sailing into the world of people who would not otherwise have that opportunity. We are a friendly group of people and our venue has a great view; after our building was built in 2010 it actually was rated as one of the top projects of 2010 in a magazine called Top Projects in 2010, based on projects in the Milwaukee area.*

*One of the issues we bring up in these interviews is how do we keep sailors involved in the sport and introduce new people to the idea of sailing as a lifetime pursuit?*

*The people who are attracted to sailing like the idea of being able to do something which has zero negative effect on the planet, you just get out there and really relate to nature. I think that is what really draws people to the sport. If we can also recreate that camaraderie that sailors seem to experience, that Corinthian spirit and we can convey that both on land and on the water, I think people will really want to be a part of it because they are becoming part of something really special. I can't tell you how healing it is, it is a powerful feeling. When you get a young person out there and they have to take the tiller, they have to make it go, and they do it and actually feel that power of harnessing nature, and they know they are doing it themselves, I don't know any other sport that teach that. It's leadership and team building skills and confidence, that is the experience of sailing.*