

In this sailing community how many, like our gal Sheila McCurdy can lay claim to having sailed 100,000 miles offshore and participated in 17 Newport Bermuda races? Most recently she was victorious in 2016 aboard the 38ft, Selkie designed by her father, James McCurdy, Selkie finished second in class and fourth overall. Monday nights you can find her over at Ida Lewis Yacht Club teaching adults to sail but be warned, if the right opportunity came along to jump on a boat today and sail off somewhere, sure, she'd do it. It's who she is and what she does. In the meantime, she has an active presence on many boards and organizations, sharing her expertise and passion for the sport. When not at sea she shares a home in Middletown with her husband, David Brown and a new puppy, a Nova Scotia duck tolling retriever, named Piper.

Your father was a respected boat designer, and obviously, you grew up surrounded by sailing enthusiasts. Your whole life has been related to the sea, what has it been like for you?

Sometimes I think that asking me about sailing is like asking a farmer about farming, it's just what I do, it's normal. I get a sort of a vicarious pleasure out of watching people discover sailing for the first time, so excited about a new challenge, in some cases fulfilling a dream, and all of that is really cool, it is just that I did not come to sailing that way.

Most of Dad's sailing when we were growing up was with clients. He worked in New York during the week and on weekends he'd be sailing with clients. But we lived on the water in Cold Spring Harbor in North Shore Long Island and a few hundred yards from the beach club was a sailing club. In summers we, my two brothers and my sister went through the junior programs, it was our summer activity.

You could probably categorize me in my youth as a tomboy. Growing up, I love being outdoors, messing about on boats, I like sports and competition and I liked hands on stuff.

My first competitions were with this Cold Spring Harbor Beach Club, I would be tapped to go to the Long Island Sound Girls Championship, I did that for a few years, either they saw my competitive streak or they were just trying to fill the boat; I was only 13 while the others were teenagers! Then I did other things but went back to sailing as an instructor in my college freshman year. In the summer of 1973, Timothea Larr, one of the best sailors I have ever sailed with, asked me to crew for her, she was determined to sail in the North American Women's National, we did a bunch of regattas to get there and I probably learned more about competitive sailing that summer than in my entire previous sailing up to that point.

Was it the pivotal moment when you decided this is what I want to do for the rest of my life?

I don't think I ever made a decision. I majored in environmental biology in college but when I graduated in the mid 1970's there were no jobs in my field due to a recession and I wasn't ready to continue school for a graduate degree.

In my family the rite of passage as it were was to sail transatlantic. I asked my father if he knew of anyone doing a transatlantic, he gave me a name and I interviewed as a volunteer on a 47ft S&S double

planked mahogany yawl, called Puffin. I volunteered as a cook and made a deal that I would cook all meals in exchange for standing 1/3 of the watches so I could learn to sail offshore, which is very different from sailing around the bay. Of course this deal left no time for sleep. We hit all kinds of weather, including the tail end of a hurricane and this was prior to satellite navigation, no tracking device, we had a radio that didn't reach very far...to sail transatlantic at that time was to be completely out of touch, it was adventurous.

So, baptism by fire?

Baptism by ocean. I stayed with the boat and did a Fastnet Race, then we cruised along the coast of France and Spain and though I left the boat for the winter and tried unsuccessfully to find a job, I was back on a boat, Carina, sailing from the Canary Islands to Tortola. Then I sailed again on Puffin from Spain to Barbados, followed by an offer to bring a boat from Bermuda to Newport. In the end, after not having sailed in the transatlantic ever, in the course of 13 months I sailed transatlantic 3 times and done a Fastnet Race and a Bermuda Race .

Maybe it was one of those situations where the career chooses you?

I think so. At the end of that summer in 1976 I took a job with what is now US Sailing when it moved from New York City to Newport. I was then 23 and I ran all the IOR handicapping certificates for US Sailing for about 2 years. That was really when I joined the marine industry.

You've logged 100,000 miles offshore, so what was the most memorable of all those passages?

The first time you do something, you probably remember it better than any other time, I probably have almost total recall of that first transatlantic. So many new experiences; when we hit the tail end of the hurricane, we were bare poled for 12 hours, the boat weighted 20 tons. We were going down the face of waves at 12 knots, the knot meter was pegged out at 12 knots so who knows how fast we were going, but the boat held together perfectly, the crew was experienced and I never felt in danger.

I will say what you learn on boats doesn't always have to do with sailing. I probably learned more about people on that trip than almost what I learned about sailing. Of the 6, 3 men were in their 60's and they discussed their experiences in World War II, I had never heard war stories- and the 2 young guys were from the south of England from very different backgrounds that I had experienced up to that point and here we were all thrown together because of our shared love of sailing. Sailing is not just about the mechanics or the competition, it brings people together, in offshore sailing you get to know the people in a way you don't on land because you are living with them constantly and often you are pushing the boat and yourselves so you get to see how people handle themselves under often stressful situations. A small band of people putting themselves at risk, it takes co-ordination and experience to achieve something, and you bond in an unusual way.

You've done 17 Newport Bermuda races, so maybe you can answer the question, what is it about this race that makes people do it over and over again, as many as 30 times?

The long-standing joke is that the reason it is held every two years is to give people time to forget about the bad part! The other thing about this race is it seems like a marathon and a sprint. Last year on Selkie, it took us a little over 110 hours to get to Bermuda. We are a short boat, we hit a lot of different weather conditions, we can't keep up with the weather, instead we must adapt as the weather passes over us. Every Bermuda race is different even though it is held at the same time of year because of the different systems. You not only want to go as fast as possible towards Bermuda from where you are, but you also have to strategize where you want to be tomorrow and the next day, given the changing weather, it is like an invisible chess board. Once the weather systems leave the coast, there is not a lot of reporting as they don't really know what is happening.

Many backed out of the 2016 Newport Bermuda Race because of the storm prediction, what did you encounter?

It was my impression that the worse case scenario wasn't going to happen, but the forecasters felt the responsibility to explain the possibility of the low getting worse. Instead it just bobbed around and eventually got out of the way. The bigger high performance boats were going to catch the low before it started to fall apart, so they had a higher risk. Since we are a slower boat we could take the stance of watch and see what happens, worse case we were going to turn around and head back to Newport. The bigger boats would not have had that option. Many of these boats have an entire summer racing schedule ahead of them, it wasn't worth the risk of structural damage. Some of the 50 boats that dropped out were also the cruising classes where many were doing the race for the first time, maybe this wasn't the best way to start.

My crew worked well together, I chose them with the idea of redundancy, someone who could pitch in as navigator, or knew in addition how to fix an engine although I also do agree that chemistry is important. Synergy term is overused but you can create a crew that is greater than the sum of its parts, if you pick well and train together.

The race is so addictive I think because it usually last 3 days, long enough that you've had a real experience but short enough that you can step away from your responsibilities. Plus you get to party in Bermuda!

Do you feel the presence of your father on Selkie?

It was not only his boat but he designed it himself, it is an expression of him and there is a poignant aspect, the boat is a member of the family. But we have had a lot of other experiences on board and time has gone by, I tend to live in the present, don't dwell in the past.

On the subject of boats, you spent two seasons with the J boat, Shamrock V, let us live vicariously through you, how was the experience?

The scale really took some getting used to, she is 120ft on deck, the helmsman would be 60ft away from the gibe trimmer. The boom was 60 ft. long, 500 square feet of mainsheet, the spinnaker was 10,000 square feet, which is close to a quarter of an acre or for a visual, it would cover all the bases at Fenway Park. You needed quite a few people to sail it and we had 38 on board. The plan was that Elizabeth Meyer would have a sparring partner for Endeavor which she was restoring. On Shamrock when everything was under control it felt great, but say the running stay blocked, if you let that off and it hit someone in the head, you'd knock them out! I was the Clerk of the Works for the racing of Shamrock, the boat was rebuilt from the deck up, over the years it had been modified and I oversaw the refit and then got to race on the boat for the following couple of years. She doesn't go very fast because she is dragging a whole lot of lead and she has a lot of wetted surface, we would easily do 12 knots, but you started really pushing water if you tried to go faster, the shape of the boat doesn't really allow it to go fast.

You ran the Museum of Yachting for a short time, you just finished your term on US Sailing and among other things, you are on the Board of Trustees for the Mystic Seaport, what is happening over in Mystic?

They have a remarkable collection of art dating back centuries. They undertook the refit of the 140 year old whaling ship, the Morgan and they took the project on during a recession; doing a fundraiser during that period was a real uphill battle but they accomplished it. All maritime museums need to be careful about accepting large crafts that need extensive maintenance. Mystic is in incredibly good shape, I am not taking credit for this because that was the case before I became involved. The decision to take the ship to sea again around eastern New England was a huge success and changed the perception of the museum. Then they launched the building of a new exhibition space, the Thompson Exhibition Building, a conceptual building that has 5,000 square feet of exhibition space, the largest state of the art single exhibit space in southern New England intended for changing exhibits and traveling exhibits. It doesn't look like 18th century New England, it has laminated beams that are curved, some say it looks like a breaking wave, others say it resembles the hull of a ship turned upside down.

You are also involved with the Cruising Club of America, what are their objectives?

I was the commodore in 2010 and 2011, if anyone asks my opinion still, I am glad to give it! But I am more involved these days on a local level organizing a group of members in and around Narragansett Bay. The Cruising Club is a group of offshore sailors who have a high standard, they want members who have had extensive experience offshore, who have a command at sea and lifelong cruisers. The mission is to promote offshore sailing and good boats for the task, that is why it became involved with the Newport Bermuda Race back in the 1920's. The club was founded in 1922 and has close to 1300 members in all of the US, Canada and Bermuda.

Are you still a trustee of the New York Yacht Club?

It is limited to two terms which I just finished and I very much enjoyed being involved with the club. They have done a great job of having a cohesive membership of people who share a lifelong love of

sailing or at least being on the water. It is STILL the kind of place where you can drop in, start a conversation with someone about some aspect of sailing and then discover later that you had been speaking to some Yachtsman of the Year or something; there is nothing quite like the NYYC. It does have a reputation for being elitist, you know you do have to be a good sailor to get in, but, you don't have to be an elite sailor and they are absolutely encouraging younger members.

This country has so many excellent sailors that come out of college sailing and through the New York Yacht Club, they have opportunities to be involved in racing all over the world. For instance in the 2015 Transatlantic Race, I raced as navigator on the club's Swan46. The Royal Yacht Squadron was one of the best hosts I can remember in an international race, that is another club that is considered elitist with an aura of exclusivity, yet they really threw the doors open for participants in the race.

Maybe this generation of leadership has a different idea of how to run a club, or how to handle racing sailors.

You have been active in many of these male dominated organizations, you were the first female commodore of the Cruising Club, what has the experience been like for you?

I sail and I get involved with these things because I am interested in it and I really like being part of these organizations and sailing in general. I have been fortunate that my name is recognizable, so I have probably had opportunities that have not been offered to other women, but, I think I have also been recognized for what I have accomplished. I work hard at it.

I work well with men, I think. I like sailing with women too but I have gotten very use to sailing with men and that has been an interesting lesson; how a group of men work together as opposed to when I sail with a woman only crew.

The men are more likely to go with trial and error, the women want to talk everything through before they do it. The women look after each other more, while the men sort of assume everything is fine until proven otherwise as far as keeping tabs on each other.

When you spoke recently at the Seaman's Institute in Newport, you stated the percentage of women participating in the 2016 Newport Bermuda Race was 7%, the same as it was in the first race in 1906, is it really that small a participation?

It is actually worse than that. In 1906 there was only one woman so she made up 7% of the group, in 1948 there were 4 women in the race so they made up 1% of the participants, in 1982 it was 4% of the participants were women, so we have actually gotten ourselves back UP to 7%!

With offshore sailing you give up a lot of creature comforts, very little privacy, maybe there are only a small percentage of women who want to put themselves in that position. An observation, at the Naval Academy and at SUNY Maritime, I think the percentage of female students is between 15 and 20%, so it may be that there is only a small percentage of women that want to go head to head in a male dominated field.

You have to be in great shape because it is grueling. Also some people push themselves towards a goal and once achieved they look to pursue a goal in another area. There might have been a time in my life when I would have been a single handed around the world sailor, but then I got older, and I am not going to do it now, one ages out of some of this too.

Your education in marine affairs, how valuable has it been to your career?

It has given me an understanding of how things work. I told you I was a biology major so I was trained to think scientifically, but then I realized after I got out of college that an awful lot that happens isn't scientific and that people ignore science when it doesn't suit them. I went to University of Rhode Island to find out more about policy and how decisions are made and how people make things happen, it was fascinating. I have to say my studies there have really influenced projects that I am working on. Again, I deal with a lot of different types of people from different backgrounds and it makes me more appreciative of their differences and how someone else approaches something and, I have to work that into what I do.

I need to address the concern in the sailing world and among the members of what has been perceived as a diminished interest in the sport, do you find this to be the case?

I don't take the premise that everything is diminishing. It may be true that fewer people are buying boats, but there are so many boats out there! The fiberglass boats last forever and there are plenty of used boats in the market. Power boats are much more reliable, maybe more people are prepared to buy a power boat rather than take the time to get better at sailing, sailing is hard to master. I am all for community boating centers, traditionally we have created a system where you have to know how to sail to have access to a facility on the water, i.e. yacht club. The yacht clubs in turn assume all members know how to sail so they don't have to do much. In sail racing, is participation down or do we have more competing races and a wider choice? There are many questions to consider.

They say we lose kids after they have gone through the junior program, that has always been the case, which is because we don't provide a pathway from junior sailing to adult sailing. If you don't want to race dingys, then at some point the junior program basically says we have nothing here for you, go play soccer. But that same yacht club has adult sailors with cruising boats or PHRF (performance handicap racing fleet) boats who would love to have a few 15-year olds on board as crew, but our system doesn't allow that transition. We should find a way to keep them engaged in sailing instead of just waiting until they can become members in their 20's.

The STEM programs are gaining popularity, sailing is such an excellent vehicle for teaching science, engineering and math, it is hands on and a laboratory for learning all these concepts as opposed to sitting in a classroom.

What we call sailing is a lot of different activities, it would be like trying to lock together all sports played on grass with a ball. Someone who started sailing in one place, say a J22 in Newport and would love to migrate to another form of sailing, say a PHRF boat on the other side of the Bay, but can't find a way to do it; that is my lecture.

Then of course there is the other comment that no one has time anymore, when did people have extra time? You make the time if you want if badly enough. Maybe we have not created the dream for them. This is something I have pushed with US Sailing because they are the governing body of this sprawling sport. If participation is down, it could be not for lack of interest or time, but the leadership of the class isn't strong. You are losing that cohesion that makes people participate.

Maybe one of the things to consider for those of us who have sailed forever, we are looking at the boats or the activities, but we are actually not looking at the types of people who should be interested in

sailing. People who are adventurous should find offshore sailing really appealing, people who want a family shared experience, for them day sailing around the Bay is perfect, people who are competitive would love the racing; you don't have to look for sailors per se but people with these characteristics and match them to the type of sailing that would interest them. We keep trying to make it about boats but it is really about the people.