

WELCOME

BY CINDY ROSS

PHOTOS BY BETH PRICE

# WARRIORS

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From its new home in Charlevoix, a one-of-a-kind program pairs veterans and sailboats to find healing on the open water.  
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Travis Johnston stares off across the open water while his strong hands delicately adjust the wheel of the sailing sloop. The words “Warrior Sailing” stretch across the T-shirt on his broad chest. His eyes are on the horizon—the same eyes that navigated dark nights in the Afghanistan mountains on dangerous missions. Today these eyes are soft and full of hope—he’s navigating a sailboat on Lake Michigan, along with a crew of other Warrior Sailors, and he’s in his happy place.

It’s a place some veterans struggle to reach from time to time. Travis served as a U.S. Army Ranger between 2006 and 2010 in both Operation Iraqi Freedom and Operation Enduring Freedom. The 75th Ranger Regiment is one of the most prestigious units in America’s Special Operation Forces, a light-infantry force involved in direct-action strikes to seize, capture or recover enemy matériel and personnel. Because of the intensity of these missions, veterans often have a difficult transition once home.

Last July, Travis participated in the Warrior Sailing (WS) program. Director Ben Poucher offers sailing camps for veterans with disabilities in various locations around the country throughout the calendar year, but 2021 was the first year they had a clubhouse to use as their base, right here in Charlevoix. While nationwide Warrior Sailing camps continue to be offered, Charlevoix now serves as the

official summer home for the program, which extends from June through September.

Ben brought the program, which is accredited by the American Sailing Association, to Charlevoix for a few reasons—the first being that he has roots here and learned to sail as a youngster on Lake Charlevoix and Lake Michigan. Lake Charlevoix is more protected and a good stepping-off point to Lake Michigan, to which it connects, making it an ideal classroom for disabled veterans. And then there are the health benefits of the natural and small-town environments found here—a big help for veterans struggling with PTS (post-traumatic stress) who do better with a laid-back atmosphere and less social pressure from crowds. The land surrounding Charlevoix also has an abundance of outdoor opportunities, and many of the veterans who come to learn to sail also enjoy hiking, running, cycling, fishing and camping.

The Warrior Sailing program serves ill and injured veterans, in addition to those who are combat-wounded. One crew member is a retired commissioned officer who developed Crohn’s disease, which put him in the hospital for two months. He has an ostomy and wears a bag under his WS microfiber shirt. Another veteran struggles with military sexual trauma. Many WS vets experience post-traumatic stress and the invisible wounds that war delivers. Others have limbs missing. But all are able to find a position and be an integral part of the sailing team.

Victor Prato is one such Warrior Sailor. His legs don’t work anymore, ever since an Afghan suicide bomber plowed



into his Humvee in 2017, leaving Victor with a spinal cord injury. Fortunately, there is a built-in lifting device onboard the J95 sailing sloop he crews with fellow sailors. He’s first fitted into a bosun’s chair, then raised out of his wheelchair with the main halyard and lowered into the boat.

The Purple Heart recipient loved sailing as a young boy and never thought he’d get to speed over the water again. “There are a lot of challenges adapting a boat for paralyzed sailors, but Warrior Sailing has helped me overcome a lot of obstacles,” he says, smiling as he shimmies his body across the seat. It takes trust to allow his fellow Warrior Sailors to help navigate his heavy, 240-pound body (Victor was a defensive lineman at Princeton before joining the Army), but that is what this program is all about—working together.

The veterans live together in rental homes in the area but all classroom work is conducted at the clubhouse located on Ferry Avenue across from the Charlevoix Yacht Club. It’s a relaxed setting with large whiteboards for teaching, comfortable couches for relaxing, good Wi-Fi, a kitchenette, and a short walk to the marina from which the group sails.

On the walls of the clubhouse are framed photos of every camp and class the organization has held. “The Warriors have been embraced by the local folks in the community,” Ben says. “They sign up to bring breakfast and dinner [to sailors] throughout the entire 10-day program. They appreciate the opportunity to give back to the veterans, and get a chance to meet and know them a bit.” Upon completing the program, some Warrior Sailors stay on at the rental house and continue to sail with locals to gain experience, become



more skilled and develop lasting relationships. They find that the environment promotes relaxation, camaraderie and teamwork.



THE ORGANIZATION’S NATIONWIDE model is to partner with sailing facilities for basic-level instruction. Core programs were established in San Diego, Annapolis and St. Petersburg, where there are vibrant military populations, and since 2013, the program has taught more than 500 wounded warriors to sail. Beginner-level sailing programs are still offered

throughout the country, but the clubhouse in Charlevoix is also where graduates from those camps can come together to further their sailing skills by taking more advanced classes.

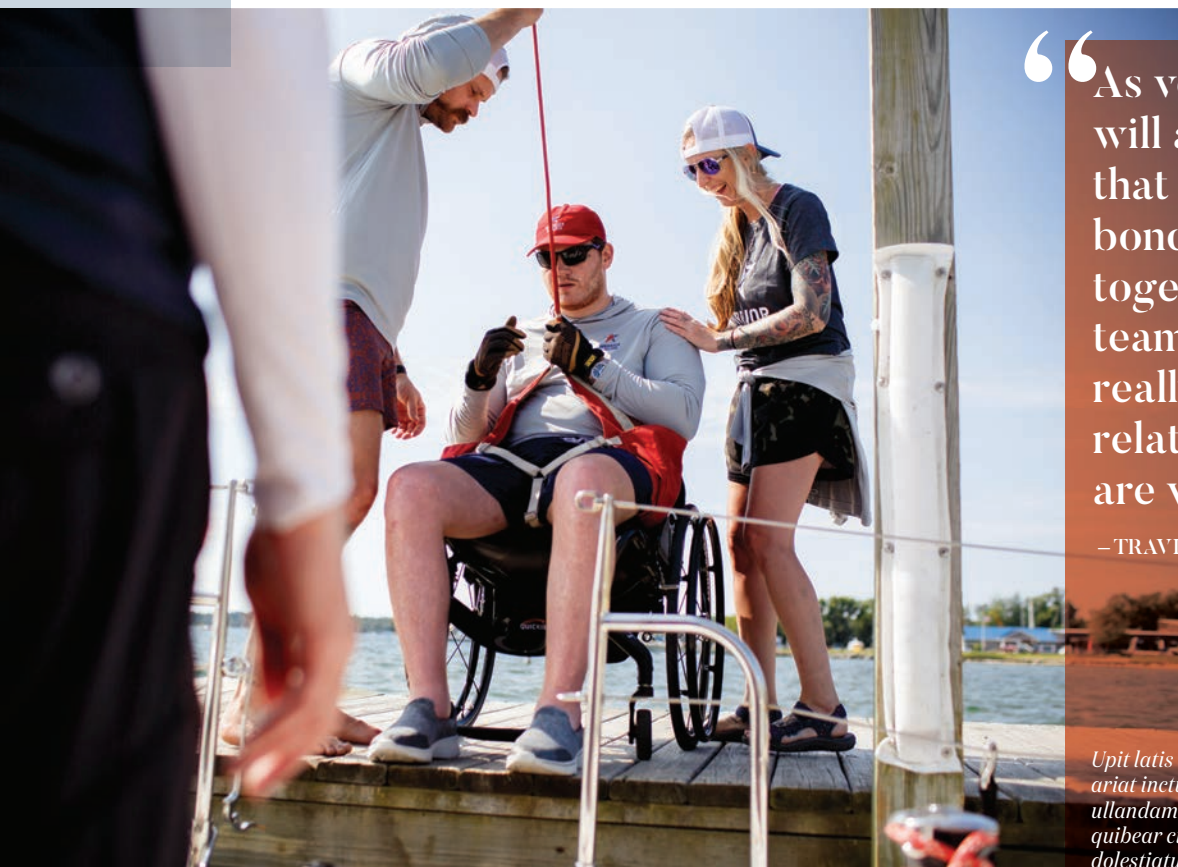
“Our program is different from other sailing programs,” Ben says. “We don’t use volunteers to coach. Our coaching staff is comprised of professional sailors whom I have identified from my various networks. They must have the right attitude to know how to work with these veterans.” Ben explains that his coaches can identify the veterans’ unique learning challenges, be it traumatic brain injury, physical disabilities or PTS, and then teach them the proper skills to successfully sail. “Warrior Sailing does not take veterans on boat rides,” Ben says. “We teach them how to sail.”

Beyond the basic sailing course both Travis and Victor participated in while they were in Charlevoix, they also completed the program’s Coastal Cruising Certification (the American Sailing Association’s 103-level certification), which builds on the skills learned in the basic class, providing more

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knowledge and confidence and the hope that the Warrior Sailors can go on to take their own families sailing. Toward the end of their class, Travis and his crew of five sailed 14 nautical miles down Lake Charlevoix testing their new skills, docking the boat, grabbing lunch downtown and motoring back to Charlevoix.

At the same time that Travis' and Victor's class was being held, there were also nine more advanced WS at the clubhouse. The veterans learned to race with the goal of participating in the legendary Chicago Yacht Club Race to Mackinac at the end of the program. All of the Warrior Sailors, cruising- and racing-certified alike, conclude their education session by participating in a Safety at Sea certification program administered by Warrior Sailing staff and aided by Charlevoix's U.S. Coast Guard.

In Safety at Sea, the sailors fire and hold hand flares; shoot signal guns; inflate PFDs; activate, blow up and flip

over life rafts, then hoist one another inside, zip up the cover and feel what it's like to crowd together when the seas are very rough. They learn to make formations in the water to become a larger, more visible mass, how to cradle an injured comrade in the water, huddle together to conserve body heat and hook together in a long line and swim to conserve energy. Although these are life-saving skills for emergencies, the sounds of laughter and joking ring out across the water as the WS practice them with their buddies.

The sport of sailing provides an environment for the kind of intimate teamwork that other individual sports don't offer. Everyone works together on the same boat and learns to navigate and repair it as needed. The Warrior Sailors are challenged by trip planning, boat preparation and dealing with inclement weather. The components of self-reliance, goal-setting and a destination-driven focus bring them right back to the same teamwork they experienced in the

military. "These guys are banged up physically and mentally," Ben explains, "but they know how to work in a group and are very good at it. As a unit, they are very powerful. They will never let their brothers and sisters down."

"It's been a lot of fun, grounding and humbling to be around these other veterans," Travis says, "especially the ones who have legit physical disabilities—are amputees or are paralyzed—and they are doing something with their lives like learning to sail. They know they need it to maintain their sanity and it's very impressive. As veterans, we will always have that common bond, but sailing together as a team of warriors, really does forge relationships that are very healing."



SAILING IS A VERY GOOD example of "eco-therapy" (or green or nature therapy), an applied practice of psychotherapy based on the principle that people are a part of the web of life; that our psyches are not separate from the environment and that the earth and nature have a self-righting capacity. When immersed, people experience improved mental health.

And being on the open water has a profoundly regulating effect. In his book "Blue Mind," marine biologist Wallace J. Nichols documents the effect open water has on our brainwaves, producing relaxed alpha-wave patterns. These waves help to rewire the emotionally dysregulated PTSD brain into a calmer, focused one capable of new learning and new experiences. The emotion of awe also plays a big role in our health, happiness and well-being. By making us feel small in

part of his being: physical, mental and emotional.

Travis still struggles with the memories of the fire fights that took place in the Afghan mountains. "Discussing it is painful and I relive it almost daily," he says. "Some days I hurt more than others; some days those memories are absent, yet sometimes they seem to occupy every corner of my brain. I've accepted that I will deal with this the rest of my life, but I am determined to improve and work on forgiving



myself and others. I can't change the past. The present and future are my priorities. I want to always be getting healthier and sustain my perpetual improvement." Today, Travis has harnessed his need to be of service and is currently working as a firefighter and attending paramedic school.

Travis is only one success story in a long line of disabled veteran sailors' stories. One of the initiatives in Warrior Sailing's BOLD Campaign, unveiled in 2021, is the goal to change the lives of 750 disabled veterans over the next five years. This comes with a price tag of about \$3,000 per person to take the course and a grand total of \$500,000 annually to run the program.

Ben is looking to offer additional "Safety at Sea" certification courses in Charlevoix for both the public and warriors to help raise funds to support programming. He also hopes to start a director training camp in Charlevoix, which would teach Warrior Sailor graduates to become directors themselves. "I want to teach Warriors real life stuff," Ben says, "and I want to give them a future." ■

For more information on the Warrior Sailing program, visit [warriorsailing.org](http://warriorsailing.org).

*Cindy Ross is the author of nine books with the latest, "Walking Toward Peace: Veterans Healing on America's Trails," featuring Travis Johnston. Cindy is also the director of the nonprofit River House PA: Healing Veterans in Nature. [cindyrosstraveler.com](http://cindyrosstraveler.com)*

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“Warrior Sailing does not take veterans on boat rides; we teach them how to sail.”

— BEN POUCHER

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relation to something larger, awe humbles us and strips away feelings of entitlement or arrogance. It also lowers levels of inflammatory cytokines and boosts the immune system.

"When you get onto the boat with the sails trimmed and you're cruising, and all you hear is the water hitting the hull, it's exciting, but it's peaceful and calming at the same time," Travis says. "The wind and the waves, they speak to me. It makes me feel good to be out there and to be in control of this craft, one that I could theoretically take around the world."

Since retiring, Travis has taken huge steps toward healing. He has backpacked more than 8,000 miles across America's loftiest mountain ranges, realizing that immersing himself in the natural world can do wonders for every