

VOYAGE OF A LIFETIME

Blind men, women experience sailing in Halifax River

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DAYTONA BEACH -- DAYTONA BEACH - **The** closest Jessica Benzing ever got to sailing before was holding a plastic model of a boat in her hands.

Blind since birth, she had no visual concept of what a real sailboat looked like, or how it felt working **the** sails and tiller, cutting through **the** water and wind on a sunny day.

Until Thursday.

"This is so awesome," Benzing said, happily following orders from **the** boat's skipper, Halifax Sailing Association commodore Thanos Nikolakopoulos. "Whenever I do something new like this, it turns out to be totally different than I expected. I'm so glad I came."

Benzing and four other blind men and women from **the Center for the Visually Impaired** boarded three 25-foot sailboats and took a 90-minute trip with crew members down **the** Halifax River in a light wind.

"We do **the** whole thing, tell them what to do, unless conditions change," said Nikolakopoulos, a Greek native who has sailed most of his 38 years. "We really don't want strong winds, to make it nice."

But this was no mere pleasure cruise.

Julienne Messmer, who oversees **the** center's independent-living training, said **the** hope is blind people can become regulars, enjoying **the** experience of sailing by assisting a sighted captain and crew.

"It's challenging to find recreational activities that are accessible," she said. "**The** goal is to use this as a teaching opportunity, something they can continue."

Leon Rosen, 48, who grew up in rural Wisconsin, is an eager student. A few weeks back, he sailed **for the** first time and caught **the** bug. He soon might help develop a curriculum at **the** center **for** teaching sailing to **the** visually impaired, adapting **the** obvious restrictions.

"I fell in love with it. It's so relaxing, but then again you always have to be aware," he said, pulling a line that adjusted a small sail. "It was a dream I had all my life."

Rosen lost his sight gradually starting at age 15 from retinitis pigmentosa, a genetic eye disease. He gave up driving at 25, and now can only see contrasted shapes.

"I enjoy fishing, too," Rosen said. "And I just started woodworking, with a saw."

Other than guiding **the** sailboat out and into shore, Nikolakopoulos directed Rosen and Benzing, but let them do all of **the** sailing.

"Hold **the** tiller, Jessica. I'm going back to bed now," Nikolakopoulos joked. "I like to have my students do everything themselves, so they are prepared if they're out there alone."

Barely a breeze blew across **the** river at times.

"It's a sport of patience," he said.

Benzing smiled, unfazed by **the** delays. She asked repeated questions with childlike enthusiasm, covering everything from sailing terms to "what do you see on **the** banks that's passing by." She took time to climb on top of **the** boat to touch **the** sails and run her fingers over **the** surfaces of **the** cabin below - creating a mental picture of **the** sailboat that opened up a brand new world.

"It's just wonderful," Benzing said.

As her crewmate, Rosen, worked **the** tiller, he spoke of **the** biggest regret voiced by most adults when making **the** transition in life after they lose their eyesight.

"They just want to drive again," he said. "Well you can, out here."

Cutline: Photo 1: Halifax Sailing Association members and a group of blind clients set sail on **the** Halifax River.

Photo 2: Jessica Benzing, who's been blind her whole life, smiles as she describes feeling **the** power of **the** water as she works **the** tiller on a 25-foot sailboat Thursday.

Photo 3: Halifax Sailing Association Commodore Thanos Nikolakopoulos, right, leads a group of blind clients from **the** **Center for the Visually Impaired** toward **the** dock.

Photo 4: Carlos Hernandez, second from left, laughs while sailing with Dewey Beliech, left, of **the** Halifax Sailing Association, Jim Scranton and Jennifer Morgan, right.

News-Journal photos/ DAVID TUCKER