

"In the Same Boat as Me"

Posted by [TBN\(Staff\)](#) On 04/08/2021

ANNAPOLIS, Md. - On the surface, it would appear that Evan McCarthy is your average, talented sailor. With years of experience on Broadneck High School's racing team and a US Sailing Level 2 Instructor certification under his belt, it would be easy to think that he was born in a catboat wearing a life jacket!

Yet a peek behind the curtain reveals a different story: One of an individual with Learning Differences who discovered how the sport of sailing could change his life forever. "I have severe but properly treated Attention-Deficit/Hyperactivity Disorder (ADHD), and anxiety," said Evan, "I was diagnosed around first grade, back in a time when little was known about these Learning Differences." School, home, friends, everything was complicated by the constant struggle for my attention.

Evan has been a counselor for the last 4 years at the SMCM summer camp for special needs kids.

At the time, Evan was labeled an undisciplined problem child. The approach was to punish without trying to work with and understand him. It became obvious early on that punishment was not working as a motivator. It only created anger and loss of self-esteem. With the help of his child therapist, Evan discovered that helping others gave him the confidence and pride he was seeking. It was now time to find him an outlet for his energy and something that would build his self-confidence.

How did Evan develop this passion for sailing? Kids with ADHD have a hard time keeping focus on things, as well as sitting still. They crave activity. They also struggle at team sports. With that in mind, Evan became involved with martial arts. "I did martial arts as an outlet for my energy," but it wasn't much fun anymore because I had been doing it for so long and it wasn't keeping my interest." Since his family were boaters, it was natural that he gave it a try.

That is when they came across Brendan Sailing, when Evan was first exposed to people who were in the "same boat" as him. Prior to the program, Evan had been educated in a traditional public-school environment, where kids with Learning Differences were few and far between, and instructional methods often left these kids behind. That first summer, when Evan was 10, marked a major change in his life: "It was one of the first times where I was in an environment of people just like me, and I felt like I fit in" said Evan. "They were just other friendly kids that I was sailing and having a good time with."

These new friends, coupled with passionate instructors, and an instructional approach that allowed him to learn and thrive, brought Evan back summer after summer. Through different program directors, different kids, and different lessons, his love for and skill in sailing grew, until eventually the Brendan instructors began placing him in boats with newer sailors. It was acting as this helping hand that sparked a passion for teaching sailing, and ultimately what fueled Evan to accept a position as an instructor. "I finally got to show off my skills and pass those skills that I had worked really hard to develop on to new kids and see the happiness on their faces when they finally grasp them," reminisced Evan. "I got to think back to how I felt during the first time that they trusted me to be on a sailboat by myself and that joy—I wanted to give that to more people who had had similar experiences like me."

While his journey, which spanned five summers as a camper at Brendan Sailing, three summers as a counselor, and two summers as head instructor, was not always easy, Evan persevered and gained the tools to not just become a successful sailor, but to conquer every obstacle in his path.

While passing on a skillset is rewarding in most circumstances, the environment at Brendan Sailing makes it even more satisfying: "I was in that same boat. I had trouble working with other people and keeping my attention focused. These kids have a lot of the same troubles. They struggle to grasp a lot of the material being presented by schoolteachers or cannot focus on homework as well as the other kids. In sailing, you practice, learn a skill, and someone trusts you to be on that boat doing it all yourself. It is such an amazing feeling that is so rewarding from having to work harder and practice a little bit more. It is exhilarating to realize I can focus on something and complete it without having to drag myself through it. I remember the moments where I experienced that, and I get to be the person that passes that on to them.

It was this genuine zeal for teaching that motivated Evan to become Brendan's head instructor. In this position, Evan has aided in creating a curriculum unlike any other. Building on his experiences as both a camper and an instructor, as well as on his love of the sport, Evan has made it a point to emphasize creative methods of teaching that build on every sailor's unique strengths by blending pre-existing ideas for teaching sailing with lessons learned in practice. "I really make sure that we're working with the kids in different ways that stimulate the unique ways that they perceive information," reflected Evan, "They can find their own paths to performing these new skills. Because the immediate skills that you need for a traditional style of learning are 'memorize this,' 'do this,' is not a process, for success for youth with Learning Differences."

One of the biggest skills Evan likes to develop in his Brendan campers is to accept the unknown—a lesson that has proven valuable both on a boat, as well as inside the classroom. "Maybe the process of slow-motion drills on the boat isn't going to be the same as figuring out how to do a math problem," he mused, "but the critical thinking and comfort with the unknown are so incredibly valuable. When sailing, no two days on the water are the same. Learning to expect the unexpected, be flexible with responses, builds confidence." According to Evan, in sailing and in life, confidence is the key to bridging the knowledge that you can accomplish something in the classroom, just like you accomplish it in the boat, if you set your mind to it.

The confidence that Brendan built in Evan has been essential to overcoming a multitude of events in his life and has been especially useful in managing what he calls "those big, overwhelming firsts." Sailing successfully means managing a variety of stimuli; "You've got to consider the wind, the other boats, so many different things to think about at once. When I was at Brendan, I was really taught to take steps to problem-solve without getting overwhelmed by anxious thoughts or all that stimuli. Instead of becoming flustered, I can use the things I've learned and then I'm able to keep going and accomplish my goals."

However, confidence is not the only thing Evan has gained from Brendan Sailing. To Evan, becoming a Brendan sailor means joining both a community and a family. "We've just got so many people that have experienced success and lives that we've touched over the years. Many Brendan alumni return and give back to the program. We're not just a program that caters to youth with learning disabilities, we're also bringing them into that whole Brendan family fueled by years of passionate sailing."

Through his time at Brendan, Evan has grown as both an individual and as a sailor and has gone on to shape the program in incredible ways. Next year, he will graduate from Washington College with a dual major in Mathematics and Computer Science. A huge accomplishment for a "problem child with no discipline".

Brendan Sailing helped make that possible. To Evan, Brendan Sailing is synonymous with family—and he would not have it any other way. After all, “there’s no better place to be than in the same boat as me!”

The Brendan Corporation, parent organization of Brendan Sailing, a 501(C)(3) non-profit founded in 1985, is dedicated to building pathways for self-confidence and personal growth in children with Learning Differences through individually tailored experiential instruction in sailing. For more information, please visit www.brendansailing.org

Summer Camp Information

Brendan Sailing is offering Summer 2021 camp sessions for youth with learning differences in Annapolis and St Mary’s County with afternoon sessions in Washington DC in the Fall And Spring. Programs start in late June and run through July. In addition to the Annapolis location, both Day and Residential Camp is offered at the St Mary’s College of Maryland Campus. Students have the experience of living on a college campus while learning how to sail and practicing STEM skills. The Day Camp follows a similar curriculum and runs simultaneously. Space still available. Scholarship student applications are encouraged. COVID-friendly cancellation policy. Registration forms and more [information](#) here on the Brendan Sailing Website (www.brendansailing.org).

Copyright © 2021 thebaynet.com. All rights reserved.