

Ellen's legacy of volunteering



Geoff Holt

The former professional yachtsman who was paralysed in a swimming accident and inspired sailors when he became the first quadriplegic to sail the Atlantic.

DAME Ellen MacArthur founded the Ellen MacArthur Cancer Trust in 2003. It is a charity which provides sailing opportunities for children recovering from cancer so they can experience the same life-changing thrill of being at sea that she herself found through sailing.

It is not only a commendable legacy, its genius lies in its built-in volunteer sustainability.

For the second year running, 15 young adults are currently taking part in the trust's Volunteer Training Week. Their objective is to attain their RYA Competent Crew certificate and some will also achieve their RYA Day Skipper ticket.

But these are no ordinary young adults. They all have their own stories of childhood cancer, each has undergone years of treatments, and each has, at some stage, sailed as a child recovering from cancer with the trust.

Now they are back, having recovered from their illness, to learn how to sail

so they can volunteer with the trust and sail with the next generation of young children recovering from cancer.

Having undergone treatments and overcome cancer themselves, these 18 to 24 year olds are role-models and a vital inspiration for the new set of youngsters facing their own challenges.

Frank Fletcher, Chief Executive of the Trust said: "Young people who have recovered from cancer very rarely meet other young people in the same position and most never get to meet an adult who went through cancer as a young person.

"The positive effect on the young people who have just finished treatment, being able to spend time with an adult who really understands what they've been through is hugely beneficial."

Of the 15 volunteers trained last year, all of them qualified with their Competent Crew certificates and 13 returned in the summer of 2010 to volunteer on many of the Trust's voyages.

Laura, one of the first participants of the trust's Volunteer week said: "I was 13 when I was diagnosed with cancer. I found out in the school summer holidays. When I went back to school I started to get more and more tired and my hair started falling

out, which was traumatic. I was teased for wearing a hat.

"I was nervous before my first trip with the trust but it didn't take long for everyone to relax. It seems so long ago now but all I remember is having an amazing time.

"Being on the water every day really is something else.

"I wanted to volunteer to give something back to the trust, but also as an opportunity to have professional training. It was absolutely amazing, we learned so many skills, though it was still fun and relaxed, and at the end I got my competent crew qualification.

"Sailing was something I never thought I would get a chance to do, let alone qualify as a competent crew!

"My first trip as a trust volunteer was the Round the Island Race last June. I was wary about being on the other side, being the volunteer and not the young person, but the young people we had on the boat were amazing, and it was great to meet them and help them learn to sail.

"I think they were able to relate to me as I've been in their position. Not everyone wants to talk about their illness but others find it helps them let off steam. Either is fine, I'm just happy to help them as a volunteer."

This year's volunteers come from all corners of the UK and they will spend their week sailing along the



Photo: EMCT

south coast whilst learning yachting terms and parts of the boat, rigging and sail handling, rope-work, fire precautions and fighting, personal safety equipment, man overboard, emergency equipment, meteorology, seasickness, helmsmanship, general duties, manners and customs, rules of the road and dinghies.

Accompanied by three qualified skippers, they are sailing on three yachts, the trust's own 44 foot yacht, Moonspray, and two yachts generously provided by Sunsail.

The Ellen MacArthur Cancer Trust has just been selected as the official

charity of the JP Morgan Round the Island race for the next two years, helping to raise much needed funds to continue their work.

The trust will be entering six boats into the race itself crewed by a total of thirty young people. Anyone wishing to support the trust can "buy a mile" at their website.

www.ellenmacarthurcancertrust.org

