

THANK YOU FOR *TEACHING* ME TO ROW



FOR LOVE OF THE WATER AND FAMILY... AND SHARING IT WITH OTHERS

Over the power of the wind and the rhythm of the waves pushing [REDACTED] westward away from the coast of Central America, the buzzing phone in my pocket pulls me away from the moment just before losing cell service. It's my parents, letting me know that my grandmother has passed away.

A few hours later, surging forward underneath a blanket of twinkling stars on my first watch of what will be three days and nights and nearly 500 miles underway, I'm working through a sea of emotions — a building swell is running in my head.

My immediate introspections are on how sublimely gratifying it is for our family to be on passage and the thrill of sailing downwind through the night in 20 knots of breeze and sizable following seas. At the same time, the voyage is bittersweet because [REDACTED] and I are sad to be leaving Nicaragua and the great times we've had there over the past two months. Yet, we're excited for the future — summer in Alaska and new horizons beyond.

With all of this, though, there's an undercurrent of intense loss. My grandmother's passing was expected, but still, it hurts deeply. Staring at the celestial array overhead with the wind at my back, my grief soon brings a smile to my face. Memories and stories flow about Halloween costumes she'd crafted for me and my siblings, gingerbread houses we'd constructed together

at Christmas, and snatching food from the kitchen until she declared it closed. While the wave of anecdotes and gratitude wash over me, I keep coming back to one thing: sailing. Here I am on my own boat, sailing offshore under a beautiful night sky with my family — and I owe it to her.

ROW FORTH

My grandma, Sandra [REDACTED], or Grandmom as we called her, loved Bass Lake — the little lake in Michigan where we grew up sailing. What's more, she loved it when her family was on the water, whether in a canoe, kayak, sailboat, or powerboat.

One of my fondest memories is of her teaching me how to row. Sitting on the boat's stern seat, she began the lessons with how to move the oars in sync to make it track in a straight line, and opposite one another to turn. Then how to look over my shoulder to pilot the little boat where I wanted it to go on the lake. With her instruction, I learned how to be safe on the water and how to properly moor the boat and stow all the equipment when the day was done. I needed to do all of this, she said, before I could drive the outboard or sail on my own. Which I desperately wanted to do.

When it did come time for me to learn how to use the outboard, at her urging, I had to study and pass my safe boater test and get my certificate. You see, Grandmom didn't

just teach me about the water, she taught others as well. She raised my dad and four uncles on the water before me and my siblings, and was one of the few female Coast Guard Auxiliary safe boating instructors in the United States at the time. As a father of two and sailing instructor myself, it's a legacy I'm honored to carry on.

Key to her approach when teaching me was to nurture my excitement for all things boating. She exposed me to new skills and experiences, and then stepped back and watched me flourish. Her rowing lessons opened up the freedom to make my own way into sailing, which unknowingly at the time, would become a lifelong endeavor.

Like any of us, Grandmom was a complex person and had her struggles, especially towards the end of her life; and I contemplated those, too. However, with wind literally in my sails when I learned of her passing, it was impossible not to reflect on all the things I am, and all the things I hope I'm teaching my boys to be — some of which I carry on in her wake.

SAIL ON

When it comes to being on the water, I like it all, but I love sailing. Some of my earliest memories at the lake are racing on the family O'Day daysailer and Sunfish. Our sailing club — through which my great grandfather was an active racer well into his 80s — raced every Wednesday, Saturday, and Sunday, and the races began and ended right off of our dock.

Though his daughter, my Grandmom, sailed in some of these races, I mostly remember her being on the race committee. While we were all rigging boats or scurrying from the house



On or near the water, Grandmom was in her element.

wolfing down sandwiches, she'd check in with a thermos of coffee in one hand and a clipboard in the other before heading a couple docks away to hold race committee court. Man I loved those summer days...I still do. What I've come to appreciate in the years since is that, while these experiences may seem unique in the eyes of an observer, for our family, it was just a normal day at the lake.

Being one of the lightest crew available, I was a top choice for many skippers — including my dad, uncles, and family friends. Every week, I'd make the rounds on various boats with captains who each handled the race course and wind conditions in their own way. My dad would whisper when the wind went light. My uncle would get worked into a flurry of excitement and expletives when we were ahead and extending our lead, which he did often. And an older family friend, Fred, would sit quiet and steady at the helm even when the wind howled and the rain pelted his well-loved yellow jacket that had long-since lost any waterproofing it may have had.

From sailing on our little lake, I jumped into the big briny blue ocean on a delivery from Ft. Lauderdale, Florida, non-stop to Newport, Rhode Island, at age 19. That was the ultimate "Whoa!" moment that shot me into the sailing industry and sparked dreams of cruising on a boat with Jill and, someday, kids of our own. I remember calling Grandmom from Newport, describing the boat, the passage, and the immense sailing scene I'd suddenly found myself in. My enthusiasm probably jumped through the phone and, on the other end, she matched it with her own excitement. These calls to her would continue throughout my water-borne adventures and eventually extend into my writing.

Fast forward through college racing and cruising with a variety of people on numerous boats, teaching sailing in Florida, the Caribbean, and Bahamas for years and Jill and I



The author heads out for a sail on Bass Lake, Michigan.



other youth sports, has become increasingly specialized in the past few decades. These days, many young sailors never venture outside of their junior sailing programs to sail with adults, try new boats beyond the mainstream youth sailing classes, or race on an intergenerational team. These experiences are foundational to lifelong sailing participation and to developing the sailing skills to be a future champion.”

I have only recently come to realize how growing up racing and sailing with so many people on different boats shaped the father, captain, and sailing coach I have become; whether I’m sailing with my wife and sons, friends, or students. In my experience, what matters most is that we’re out here together — families, friends, and acquaintances of all ages and abilities — learning from one another and passing along the joys of sailing to whomever we can. Whether she knew it or not, that is exactly what Grandmom did when she took her sons on the water, when she taught safe boater classes, when she worked on the race committee, or when she patiently sat in the back of a rowboat and calmly explained to her grandson how to make it move through the water.

I don’t know how many miles have passed under all the keels of all the boats I’ve sailed, with all the people in all the places, since first dipping the oars of that little rowboat in the water. But I have my Grandmom to thank for each and every mile thereafter. That’s a gift I will never forget, never take for granted, and one I will always carry on in memory of her.

Indeed, the last time I saw Grandmom, I took her hand off the armrest of her wheelchair, held it in mine, kissed her forehead and, with salty tears welling in my eyes, whispered: “Thank you for teaching me to row.” Ⓐ



carrying on the family sailing tradition.

were Pacific Northwest bound. When we bought [redacted] in Seattle, I remember the elation and support from my parents, grandparents, and others. It’s one thing to chase your sailing dreams, but it’s another to have a cheering section of boaters behind you. Grandmom, in particular, loved following my blogs and articles about sailing throughout Oregon, Washington, British Columbia, Alaska, and eventually to Mexico and Central America. When we spoke, I could feel that my sailing stories flowed from me to her as she lived vicariously; considering her influence on me, I felt these were her stories, too.

Amongst my grandmother’s sons, it was my dad who took his passion for sailing the furthest and has remained continually active as a sailor. Always keen for a cruising or racing adventure, my dad takes every opportunity he can to come sail with [redacted] and me; cruising in Washington, British Columbia, Alaska, and California, and racing in the Oregon Offshore Race. And I know Grandmom loved watching that passing-on of sailing through her family, from her father all the way down to her great-grandchildren.

SPREAD THE LOVE

I write all of this not only as a tribute to my Grandmom or as an autobiography, but mostly as encouragement for people of all ages and backgrounds to get out on the water together. Sail with the young, young at heart, and everyone in between. It’s never too early to start someone into a life of boating and it’s never too late to feel the pull of the tiller in your hand, the wind in your hair, or the joy of sharing it with another person. Age doesn’t matter on the water and the ocean doesn’t care what generation you’re part of.

Firsthand, I’m aware of the immense value of intergenerational sailing in order to grow the sport and lifestyle. It’s how I grew up. When I came across the following quote from a US Sailing article on the topic, that fact was really driven home — and it’s likely to resonate with many sailors:

“Sailing with adults and on many different boat types was once the norm for young sailors. But youth sailing, like many