

Youth2Adult — Y2A — is a series of articles celebrating sailing's role in youth development for Caribbean children.

Kids, kids... KIDZ! When the marine trade industry gets involved for the benefit of their community, vocational training can advance youth development.



Kidz at Sea was a Y2A feature in 2015. You may recall that Garth Steyn summed up the challenge that got him to start Kidz at Sea in 2012: "One of my employees at Aqua Mania Adventures (his local tour company) needed a captain's license. At the time, there was not a certifying institution on St. Maarten. RYA certification was too expensive. I took the young man to Anguilla, where he secured the necessary licensing." At this point, it came together in Steyn's mind: "Unlike Antigua and Anguilla where you see local people captaining and crewing sailboats, we don't have that in St. Maarten." He realized that Black people were disproportionately under-represented in St. Maarten's marine industry. He set out to do something about it and founded the "Build Your Future" project (the precursor of Kidz at Sea) in conjunction with St. Maarten Marine Trade Association (SMMTA) and the St. Maarten Sailing School. The first project was to teach local youths how to build five vessels. One of the things that has made Kidz at Sea successful and sustainable is how Steyn and others were able to get the buy-in of local organizations and businesses. As a businessman and SMMTA Board Member, Steyn had the vision for what could be, and acted.

Heineken Regatta organizers in St. Maarten saw a promotional opportunity and commissioned an artwork competition whose winners would go on to decorate sails for the new "Build Your Future" project's boats. Other community institutions such as Island Water World, Budget Marine, FKG Marine Rigging and Fabrication, St. Maarten Sails & Canvas, the Harbor Group of Companies and Safe Cargo Services pledged sponsorship. The Caribbean International Academy, St. Dominic and Milton Peters College high schools and Secondary Vocational Education signed on for students to do the building. Aqua Mania provided a shed in which the first boat could be constructed. Well-known Caribbean catamaran builder Dougie Brooks volunteered as a mentor. One by one, more and more individuals and companies committed to see this worthy project succeed. Momentum built.

Michele Korteweg, Administrator for Aqua Mania, comments about recent individuals who are making a difference for Kidz at Sea youth development: "Wim de Visser, head of the Milton Peters College, is vital in reaching out to the local youth. By integrating the boat building program as part of the college's carpentry course and by promoting it heavily among students and teachers through sailing orientations and newsletters, the number of students that have been introduced to sailing has increased significantly over the years.

Besides Wim, other volunteer mentors integral to the success of the program are Rien Korteknie and Iain Mobbs. They spend their spare time teaching the kids how to sail, introducing them to racing and all other aspects of sailing. With their experience in the marine industry, they have an immense impact on the students' development, not only regarding sailing, but also regarding their personal development.

"Of course, the program would have never gotten to where it is now without the driving force of board member Lorraine Talmi and founder Garth Steyn. They go above and beyond to further develop the program and are always looking for ways to make this program benefit the local community of St Maarten. It has gotten so much

bigger than getting the youth introduced to sailing and/or boat building. They have ensured that the program is having a positive spin-off, impacting the local community as a whole in many important areas, such as health, sports and education."

According to Michele Korteweg, "The second boat is being built and we have a couple of very keen girls involved in that. We also started cooperating with the Ujima Foundation and the I Can Foundation, local foundations on St. Maarten that support underprivileged and troubled youth. We provided the I Can Foundation with a paddleboard kit that they will build with a group of their youngsters, expanding our program beyond our own original reach. This will also happen with the Ujima Foundation. This allows us to attract a younger target group, making for a better integration of our program, and also the longevity of it."

The Ujima Foundation is a 24-hour residential therapeutic program for ten "at risk" young males between the ages of eight and 14 who have been diagnosed with an emotional or behavioral disorder. The Ujima Foundation adequately diagnoses and treats the disorders. Therapists help them to develop coping skills, self-confidence, self-worth, anger management and a sense of safety within the family and community. Facility activities reinforce positive family dynamics, teach adequate parenting skills and decrease repetitive delinquent behavior.

Michele adds, "A new sponsor that came in last year in full force, Essilor, is increasing their support this year. Part of their sponsorship is conducting eye exams on Kidz youngsters, but this year they will also see those that are in the I Can and Ujima programs."

The Essilor Vision Foundation is committed to eliminating poor vision and its lifelong consequences, and to providing underprivileged people the opportunity to live better lives through better sight. Since 2008, the Essilor Vision Foundation has, with the help of many partners, provided more than 690,000 screenings to individuals in need.

"St. Maarten has limited equipment, eye doctors and eye care available," Michele notes, "Whatever is available comes at a high cost and is not covered by insurance. As a result, eye problems are often not discovered until the eyes are already seriously affected. By catching poor vision and irregularities early, serious damage can often be prevented. Obviously we also want to raise awareness about the damage the sun can do to one's eyes, especially when being on the water sailing. Proper sun protection is a must, which is what Essilor provides for the youth enrolled in the Kidz At Sea Program.

"In addition, Essilor visited St. Maarten last year not only seeing our youth but also seeing a large elderly group at the White and Yellow Cross, most of whom desperately needed prescription glasses or additional eye care. Even more exciting is that Kidz at Sea is working with the sailing community in Anguilla to see whether Essilor can see some of the youngsters in their programs.

"Anguilla participated with a group of their local youngsters in the 2016 St. Maarten Heineken Regatta. Their team was sponsored by the St. Maarten Sailing School and Kidz at Sea Foundation. This inspired them to start building a boat in Anguilla as well. They just found a sponsor who contributes greatly to making this possible. Believing that everyone benefits from regionalized sailing, Kidz at Sea set up the initial contact. We can start racing with each other on a regular basis, sharing ideas and cooperating to develop a larger platform."

What if island governments, community organizations and corporations saw this kind of youth development as a currency more valuable than EC, Euros or US dollars?

Investing in developing all youth, and in Kidz's case, in disadvantaged kids, pays big dividends. Disenfranchised children are far more likely to end up in crime, jail and rehabilitation. For Caribbean nations the toll is great not only on local society but on the negative image that can follow diminishing that nation's ability to secure their share of new business moving into their region as well as lucrative tourism dollars.

Healthy island communities where children receive quality education, both academic and vocational, as well as a chance to build life-long skillsets in swimming, sailing, music and gardening create long-term mental and physical health and aid children to become contributing citizens. Now is the time to pool resources, stimulate creativity or downright copy organizations such as Kidz at Sea.

What more can be done on your island, large and small, for the positive development of our greatest resource — kids? Er, make that Kidz.

Ellen Birrell attributes her opportunity to cruise the Caribbean aboard S/V Boldly Go to life skills built in childhood. Believing swimming and sailing are essentials for island youth, she supports grass roots and competitive junior sailing, and serves as chair of sailing development for the Caribbean Sailing Association (<http://caribbean-sailing.com/sailing-development/the-future-of-caribbean-sailing>).




Building boats helps build futures for St. Maarten's youth

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