

HANDS ON

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

Hands on. Right on.

What if more child-development organizations followed the keen template that has been built in recent years by an organization called Hands Across the Sea? Driving K-12 literacy in the Eastern Caribbean, "Hands" concentrates on building viable libraries by training and empowering local teachers, administrators and students. Creating culturally and age-appropriate book wish lists and building library infrastructures that emphasize local leadership, that of the predominant population, they build black role models.

While Hands has gone to Herculean efforts to rally US-based NGOs, corporations and individual donors, they don't lose sight of the fact that it all comes back to West Indians taking ownership to keep their literacy mission alive and thriving. Hands said it best recently in a message to their supporters: "Like us, you believe that children are the precious future, and that we should waste no time, spare no effort to give them the very best chance in life." For those of us involved in the promotion of sailing for island children, this is spot on.



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They ask questions such as: "Is Hands doing the best possible job of raising the literacy levels of our stakeholders — the children in primary and secondary schools across the Eastern Caribbean? Is Hands not only making a difference but building sustainable, structural change? Is Hands making the wisest use of funding received from individual, foundation and corporate donors?" You could basically rephrase that inserting "XYZ Sailing Program" every time that statement reads "Hands". This all can and should apply within the development of junior sailing programs here in the Eastern Caribbean.

Another area where Hands excels is in their training materials. Their "Seven Steps to Building a Community Library" manual (www.handsacrossthesea.net/images/resources/HandsLibraryManual.pdf) uses simple and specific suggestions with examples from communities in Grenada, St. Vincent & the Grenadines, St. Lucia, etcetera. Every picture is of local people in action. This is *their* manual.

A simple "How to Do It" manual could be created and used when introducing the idea of building a junior sailing program to a given island community. Community based. Sustainable. This is not to suggest that one size fits all, but a manual that gives step-by-step illustrations of how other Caribbean communities start and keep basic learn-to-sail programs would be effective. It would, of course, take catalysts, people like Tom and Harriet Linskey (Hands founders), to unite local leaders behind the idea and its worth. A simple, very visual manual could go a long way in lighting the imagination and instilling a "we can do this" attitude for Caribbean sailing instruction.

"This is what I think the CSA (Caribbean Sailing Association) needs to be dealing with: a program that does not go into great detail but gives the fundamentals of safe sailing. Does not matter what type of boat is being used but gives a generalized step-by-step ladder of instruction and rewards for achievement that is cheap and easy to follow," said Chris Haycraft, RBVYC Vice Commodore and (then) CSA Sailing Development Chair in early 2016.

Starting and sustaining junior sailing programs in the Caribbean has its own unique set of challenges. Some sailors tell me, "RYA and US Sailing already have excellent training materials. Why re-invent the wheel?" But, these organizations supply materials that are geared for societies with different infrastructure, budgets, sailing conditions, communication style and customs. World Sailing (previously ISAF) has outreach programs, such as the Emerging Nations Program, which are well-intentioned and effective for developing elite sailors within already established clubs and junior programs but do not provide for start-up or fledgling programs. The CSA is beginning to study and understand the challenges faced in the less developed island nations. In recent years, from St. Kitts southward, there have been individuals who are taking junior sailing to the next level. These individuals are usually parents and/or persons who come from a yacht racing experience. (Hey, I'm not knocking these folks. I, too, come from a yacht-racing background.)

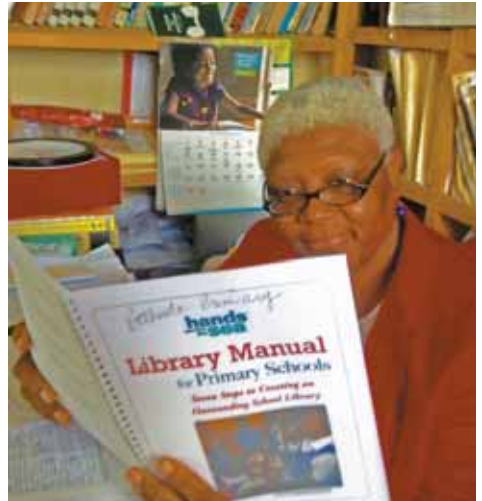
Just as a student learns basic reading, writing and arithmetic whether or not they

plan to be an author or mathematician, so island children can learn basic sailing whether they plan to go on to race or to a marine-industry career, or just retain the life lessons sailing provides.

L'Esterre Junior Sailing (LJS) in Carriacou, Grenada is an example of a community junior club that is finishing its fourth year. From its formation in 2012, the director is "Kayak" (the name for a Carriacou native) Allison Caton, with instructors being fellow Kayaks Kirsann Boatswain and Akim Clement. A long-time junior sailing advocate and cruiser (who prefers to remain anonymous) saw clearly the need for a club run of, by and for locals. He went behind the scenes to set the club up for viability and sustainability.

Bringing basic sailing skills and safety to Carriacou children, LJS stands as a beginning model for other island communities. Though LJS is not perfect, Allison Caton has this to say, "The truth is that LJS continues to function because we have financial backing from outside of our immediate local community. Sustainability of any community-based youth development takes the commitment of those with financial resources to fund it and local people to implement it." Could this model evolve to greater self-sufficiency over time when government and local people become familiar with the benefits of junior programs? LJS brings testimony that kids can pick up the safety lessons associated with basic sailing in their own neighborhood by people who look like themselves. Black children need black role models.

A current block to sailing proliferation is that most young local people do not understand that there are potential careers available to them if they become a certified sailor. They don't know that there are highly paid positions as captains, marina managers, charter crew and tradespersons. No one ever tells them and so they don't make the connection. There are several organizations on various islands that recog-



Youngsters are taught by a community's adults. Can Caribbean junior sailing programs emulate a literacy-development template such as that provided by Hands Across the Sea, which emphasizes 'hands on' local leadership? Ellen Birrell outlines the possibilities

nize this and are working to make changes in perception.

Now to the finale: sustainability. Hands gets it. Do we, in the sailing community? We can build manuals, create certifications, even obtain funding, but the future of junior sailing programs lies in the hands of locals seizing on the opportunity and appreciating sailing as providing invaluable insight and training for their children. Hands Across the Sea has put in place local leaders (teachers, parents, administrators) to manage their own local libraries. Started approximately ten years ago, Hands is making a sustained improvement in literacy.

This concept crystallized for me when I began frequenting the new regional library in St. Thomas in 2016. A glorious two-storied modern building, its expansive windowed foyer leads one into a tiled entry and toward a rich wooden desk staffed with three persons to welcome and inform you. In my many visits, never more than a half-dozen patrons utilized the shelved books or work tables. The only beehive of activity is a small room tucked in the rear of the building, where computers are provided. Here sat more than a dozen citizens of all ages, busy on games or social media. Sadly, the library feels more like a museum holding a game arcade than a library developing literacy and meaningful education — just as some facilities, such as water purification or desalination plants, which are funded and built by outsiders, sit on various islands unused and in disrepair. Only when libraries and junior sailing programs alike are designed incorporating inspired, trained locals who are willing and able to train and manage other local people will they be positive and lasting.

Even as I write this, the CSA is actively working to create a CSA Sailing Certification that can be utilized in junior sailing programs throughout the Caribbean. Programs in St. Maarten, Antigua, the BVI, St. Kitts and elsewhere have indicated that they cannot afford RYA or US Sailing certified courses. Caribbean parents enrolling their children in basic sailing want to see a certificate in hand afterward if they pay for summer sailing programs for their children. The better-funded programs of the Leeward and Virgin Islands want a certification that will be recognized by World Sailing. Can the CSA come up with a certification that meets the stringent modern yacht-racing criteria, but also is affordable and gives island children the rudiments of water safety and basic sailing? Will a World Sailing-caliber certification end up serving mostly affluent children, still leaving behind children of lesser means?

Hard questions need to be faced.

Taking a "Hands on" approach, youth development for Caribbean children can be robust and sustainable. We can do this.

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 Caribbean Sailing Association (<http://caribbean-sailing.com/sailing-development/the-future-of-caribbean-sailing>).