

BRISA — from Dream to Reality

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

La Parguera, Puerto Rico, 1991: Graham Castillo, an attorney and sailing instructor by training, helped windsurfing champion Eddie Rodriguez run a sailing summer camp. By 1993, they had a vision for youth development through sailing instruction for kids from disadvantaged communities close to La Parguera. Their dream seemed to take shape when early in the '90s, the Puerto Rico Sailing Federation (PRSF) promised a donation of seven Optimists from Russia. Alas, they were shipped to the wrong organization. Other setbacks included lack of location offering good water access, lack of public support, and lack of a steady sailing community from which to develop a volunteer base. Unable to ramp it up, the plan was shelved.

"We got a lot of rejection initially. There was a void in community leaders and interested parents. They wanted to know what was in it for them financially. We had to convince them that it was not a moneymaking scheme. Every penny is invested in the kids. It is an educational association for youth," Graham says.

In 2009, Graham again poured his energy and legal training into formulating a corporate structure for the public sailing center. By 2010, he presented the plan to then Borinquen Islands Sailing Association (BRISA) President Nelson Ramirez, who already embraced the educational mission and included such in BRISA's bylaws. "Interestingly, he never envisioned the structure of public sailing centers. But, as a retired college professor and great sailor, he immediately accepted the plan. His wife, Pura, a retired college professor and expert in education, along with Nelson, helped push the plan to the next level. They are currently working on a sailing curriculum for the development and local licensing of new instructors."

With support from BRISA, the community sailing plan was revived for La Parguera. This is not the only Puerto Rican success story enabled by umbrella organization BRISA.

Comprised of a diverse membership including cruising and racing sailors and power boaters, BRISA roots are growing in neighborhoods throughout Puerto Rico. Its emphasis is on family participation. From their website: "BRISA is a non-profit corporation that was founded with the purpose of promoting recreational sailing, nautical education and boating safety for the geographical area of Puerto Rico and adjacent islands. To achieve these goals, the Association will be responsible for advancing the sport of sailing regattas, performing activities such as sailing cruises, fishing tournaments, sailing, civic and educational activities... to promote fellowship among our community of sailors and educate our youth under the best principles and social values through sport. For such activities, we will use the best physical facilities within our reach. The Association shall have the power to own, control, operate and rent incidental properties to achieve these purpose. The Association must comply fully with their 'non-profit' qualification."

"The Opti class was nearly dead in 2014. Kids grew up and moved on causing a temporary void. It took a while to boost ranks. Now, Club Náutico de San Juan (CNSJ), the Ponce Yacht & Fishing Club and BRISA are supporting each other's events," says Graham. The Optimist challenges were not confined to southern Puerto Rico. CNSJ's momentous International Dinghy Regatta held each February featuring Optimists and other one-design boats had a momentary hiccup. It was discontinued in 2014 but resurged in 2015.

"Leadership is a huge factor. Optimist Class President Alfredo 'Ape' Lopez, Arturo Diaz, Jose Maria Albiñana, and committed parents and leaders have been instrumental in reviving the Optimist class," says Graham.

A new 2015 summer club held in Santa Isabel, located east of La Parguera on Puerto Rico's southern coast between Ponce and Salinas, was successful. Graham indicates that the mayor got behind funding and security, and offered resources once he understood that the BRISA summer club was an educational association for kids. "Every penny is invested in the kids," Graham emphasized.

In Santa Isabel, José Maria Albiñana works actively with the local community and BRISA. "We are very aware that everyone needs to learn to sail," he says. This attitude of including disadvantaged children normally unable to access the world of sailing is growing within BRISA.

José also emphasizes the importance of preserving Puerto Rico's sailing heritage. The Chalana Festival every February embraces both national heritage and modern sailing. Once known as fast-boat "49ers" built in backyards, traditional Chalanas are incorporated into BRISA activities, racing regularly out of Ponce Yacht Club and CNSJ. Demonstrating that they are behind preserving Puerto Rican historical boat sailing, the government came out to record a Chalana event recently.

BRISA is getting traction with Puerto Rican business companies, too. Sponsorship is coming from a commercial wind farm, fast-food restaurateur El Meson and various marinas. Graham explains to prospective sponsors that, as you grow the learn-to-sail programs, ushering socio-economically deprived kids into the sport and associated travel, there is an industry that grows in parallel. At the recent Fourth Annual Fun Day sponsored by El Meson, BRISA breezed ahead with the largest dinghy gathering Puerto Rico has ever mustered — 76 dinghies!

Another step forward in 2015 came when, after numerous meetings and lobbying of the government's sports authority (the Recreation & Sports Department's Sports Institute), they agreed to support BRISA and PRSF as sports educational entities. BRISA is behind the development of an instruction program for Sailing Levels 1 through 3. Step One will be to develop more instructors and more volunteers. Step

Two is engaging municipalities. Step Three is purchasing more Optimists and small one-design boats.

BRISA now has three chapters: BRISA East, including Fajardo and Puerto del Rey, which includes big boats; BRISA South, including Ponce and Salinas; and BRISA West, including La Parguera and Boquerón, where Marina Pescadería is playing a pivotal role.

According to Graham Castillo, "BRISA has been working on the development of Sailing Centers for the past five years. BRISA is devoted to developing the sport through education in both the recreational and competitive arenas. Utilizing ISAF and/or US Sailing, training programs include certification of instructors, race officers and national judges. The recent creation of a partnership with the government has brought new valuable resources."

Currently, Graham is PRSF secretary. Serving on the PRSF Board, he fully understands why there is a need for BRISA. "The Puerto Rican Sailing Federation is the MNA (World Sailing's Member National Authority). They are tasked with advancing only athletes produced by yacht clubs and Olympic boat classes for the Olympic cycle. To advance sailing education within Puerto Rican communities, this is where BRISA comes in. Puerto Rico's Recreation & Sports Department Sports Institute believes in our program."

"The key is developing more instructors, as well, more volunteers. The secret is volunteers," he says.

"Sometimes all this is very tiresome. People expect me to be at every event." But, "teaching kids good values and making them better citizens" turns Graham on and keeps him chugging along. "They collect trash from beaches, leaving them cleaner than we found them. BRISA puts an emphasis on being a good sportsman. The process of protests and 'why sportsmanship', getting parents to attend to see that when we teach the kids, we teach values. We bring professionals in to talk to the kids. Sailing has taught me these ways. We make sure to keep it fun and to build leadership skills."

Graham leaves us with: "The answer is simple. Make it a fun family, community and educational affair by inviting children to our sailing center, where they not only learn the Racing Rules of Sailing but also class rules, and have the opportunity to



Boats racing in BRISA events range from the high-tech to the traditional. BRISA stands for Borinquen Islands Sailing Association, Borinquen being the indigenous Taino name for Puerto Rico

sail one-design boats. These children have the unique opportunity to grow in both (local and international) sailing cultures. Parents are invited to participate in seminars, help race officers with sequences, set marks with their own powerboats and perform other race-related chores. In turn, this results in a fabulous experience and develops a sense of belonging in the organization. We all work together as a team.

"Additionally, we hold educational seminars around the island. We get a complete cultural immersion sailing and racing Chalanas, which builds great friendships. We promote the Chalana and Nativo tradition by inviting these classes to participate in other BRISA events around the island. Holding our signature event, the Annual Chalana and Nativo Festival, now for six consecutive years, includes formal education for parents and volunteers to develop as new sailing instructors, coaches and leaders. Without them, there will be no continuity. The plan is to have the community run the sailing center. This will take a few more years as we work to certify instructors and develop the new leaders."

The reality of what is happening with BRISA in Puerto Rico inspires hope for what can be for youth sailing elsewhere.

Take-Aways

- With perseverance and clear messaging, obtaining community and government support for public sailing centers is possible.
- A nation's MNA and a non-profit like BRISA play unique roles within sailing development.
- BRISA's "purpose", as stated on its website, is explicit and encompassing — a model from which other nations can draw valuable language and ideas.
- Preservation of historical local boat sailing and modern boat competition can co-exist.

For more information visit www.brisaweb.net and BRISA on Facebook.

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 junior sailing and serves on Caribbean Sailing Association's development committee (Caribbean-sailing.com/youth/youth-programs).