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Y2A BY ELLEN EBERT BIRRELL

# THE BAHAMAS — TIES THAT BIND

*I want to encourage those in the Caribbean and around the world to continue the good work. Sometimes it gets discouraging and you feel that you're in it alone. The benefits outweigh the discouraging times. When we continue to work with young people in a positive way, we not only affect the youth, but our communities, our country, our world.*

— Melvin Higgins, Commodore

Harbour Island Sailing Club, Eleuthera, The Bahamas

Not all of us, like Melvin Higgins, have the tie that binds us to youth sailing. What better method for Caribbean youths to understand the sea and the weather and the opportunities within the marine industry than junior sailing? As we watch the lack of care being shown for the marine environment, what better method for a long-term solution than supporting a culture of education and caring? Youth sailing can be part of this process while alleviating unemployment and its associated societal ills by introducing marine skills and building self-esteem and confidence for children as they march toward adulthood. While Melvin's overarching remark seems broad, it is anchored in his solid belief that more men need to step to the plate to mentor children and teens. He wants to create ties that bind. As the commodore of a club whose driving force is youth sailing he says, "We have shifted our focus to training and keeping male teenagers around. Our country is broken-up islands. Young men leave to advance their careers. For example, one of our youth sailors just left for Florida to acquire his pilot's license."

Are coaching clinics the answer? Is remunerating young men for coaching going to be a game changer?

From the Bahamas to Grenada, sustainability is a challenge. The reality: men need a livelihood. Melvin reflects, "During the summer (a two-week sailing camp), we can pay a small amount. I think one of the mistakes that we made was placing our focus on the newer, younger sailors. Older sailors who had aged out of Optimists were getting neglected. As a result they lost interest and drifted away. We realized this and started an aggressive Sunfish and Laser push. We are still bringing the Lasers along but can now also carry 15 to 17 Sunfish sailors to regattas. Add to that, we have started to look within the club for help. Training our older teens, one has joined the workforce but is able to help out during our summer sailing program, another travelled to the Opti Nationals to assist younger sailors, yet another has become a main chaperone at Harbour Island and when we travel. By looking in-house, we have begun to solve the challenge of retaining older youth. I think holding national coaching clinics and having teenagers become internationally certified coaches would definitely be a positive boost for their confidence. Outside help is always welcome."

Says Bill Canfield of St. Thomas Yacht Club in the US Virgin Islands, "We encourage our female teens to get US Sailing certified. They do magic to nurture and build confidence in our five- to ten-year-olds." This has also been the case with St. Lucia's Stephanie Devaux-Lovell leading local coaching efforts. Melvin says, "We have found out that the girls are excellent when it comes to helping the younger sailors, in terms of coaching and teaching them to sail. Some of our older girls have gone off to further their education, so we work to keep the trend going. It helps to have Melisha (his daughter), the top female Bahamian Opti sailor, here in Harbour Island."

With ten junior sailing programs within the Bahamas, Harbour Island has been the first and one of the only to build a clubhouse.

The Bahamas Sailing Association (BSA) has to be commended for the tremendous job that they have done and continue to do promoting and advancing youth sailing. A testimony to that, just last year the Nationals held in Hope Town, Abaco, boasted 50 Optimists. For the first time, a sailor from outside of the capital (Nassau) won the Nationals — Brandon Sands of the Cherokee Sound Sailing Club. Sailing's popularity continues to grow throughout the Bahamas. "We are hoping that our new generation of sailors continues the great tradition that was started by two of our Bahamian legends: Sir Durward Knowles and Cecil Cooke, who won the very first Olympic gold medal for our country sailing in 1964 in the Star class," Melvin says.

On a somber note, right before Opti Nationals in October, the Bahamas were hit by Category 4 Hurricane Joaquin. It inflicted major damage to the southern islands of Acklins Island, Crooked Island, Rum Cay, San Salvador, Long Cay, Ragged Island, Mayaguana and Long Island; many were left homeless and schools, churches, clinics and infrastructure were destroyed. Consequently, Mack Knowles Junior Sailing Club dropped out and the Nationals were delayed by two weeks. In November, the BSA and the Cooke Family saw to it that the Mack Knowles sailors participated in the Cecile Cooke Memorial Junior Regatta bringing the total to 57 sailors — the largest Bahamian junior regatta of all time!

**Y2A Featured Youth**

Melisha Higgins, 14 years old  
Junior Sailing

Program: Harbour Island Sailing Club, Eleuthera

Favorite Boat: Optimist

The draw of adventure brings Melisha Higgins to sailing. Though nurtured by her sailing father into the process, it is the exploration beyond her island and coming back to report on it to the younger children that calls to Melisha.

ROBERT DUNKLEY



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Her favorite subject at Harbour Island All Age School is geography. "When I grow up I would love to be a teacher," the 10th grader says. Harbour Island is located just north of its mainland, Eleuthera. Melisha's initial sailing forays to Nassau, Grand Bahamas, the Abacos and Long Island eventually gave way to broader travel to Miami for the 2012 Orange Bowl Regatta, Fort Lauderdale for the Boomerang Regatta and Bermuda in 2013 for the North Americans.

That Track and Field is her favorite school sport speaks of someone who is literally on the move! Melisha began sailing Optimists at eight years of age. At her first experience racing in the Nationals in 2010 "it was blowing very hard, I was very light and the boat heeled. I sat inside my boat and it just sank. One of the older sailors came to help. I didn't want to go back out, but he encouraged me." She's advanced through to Sunfish and Lasers. At 14, she admits the Optimist is still her favorite because "it is much smaller and easier to handle, and it was my first boat." Her first love.

Decision-making, taking responsibility, confidence, courage, social skills, sportsmanship and a regard for helping fellow sailors are the take-aways Melisha's received from learning to sail and race. "Commitment and dedication. Sailing requires a lot of dedication. I'm the top sailor and I've always been at the top of my (academic) class." She would like to see more people volunteering and helping with the coaching. "My father is the only one right now. The older sailors come to help. They are taking more responsibility and developing."

She has only one more year in Optimists. She sees herself racing Sunfish and Laser 4.7 after that. Eventually, "I'd like to be the first female to win a gold medal in the Nationals."

Her message: "Once you put your mind to it, you can do it. Work hard and stay committed."

#### Y2A Featured Adult

Melvin Higgins, 48 years old  
Employment: Building contractor



We step out of our usual Y2A pattern of studying an adult who is employed in the marine industry, to look at the volunteer work that Melvin Higgins is doing on his small island. His influence on sailing development is anything but small. As commodore of Harbour Island Sailing Club, he not only sets the tone but also does much of the coaching himself. "The club was founded to promote junior sailing," he says.

As a Bahamian, his love for sailing was instilled by his father. Jacob Higgins was the first Bahamian executive chef. Originally from Mayaguana Island (the least populated island in The Bahamas), he started out washing dishes and worked his way up. Sent off to Canada to further his studies, he apprenticed for a year in the early '80s. Europeans and Americans had dominated the culinary field in the Bahamas, but he went on to run major hotel restaurants, private restaurants and

even the Nassau YC. At that time, the government owned most of the Bahamian hotels. Eventually, he opened his own restaurant: The Guinep Tree.

Learning sailing from his father on their local wooden boat, *Cobra*, instilled courage and boldness in Melvin. *Cobra* comes from a lineage of open fishing boats that evolved into racing boats. All Melvin's sailing knowledge came from native boats. *Cobra* falls in the B Class, which is 21 feet long, using a crew of six in light air and as many as ten in heavy weather. There is also the A Class, which is 28 feet with a 16- to 18-person crew, and C Class with a five-person crew. "We went out sailing every weekend whether there was a race or not. It taught us how to be confident and responsible. When I was growing up, there were two distinct groups of sailors: local folks and Nassau YC modern yachtsmen. When Dad quit sailing, it was up to my brother and me to take the boat around. We had to be more aware of our surroundings. When others would go out partying, we had to stick around and make sure that the boat was secured. I learned sportsmanship and socializing. You meet people from all walks of life, from all around the world. Foreign yachtsmen would want to join us aboard *Cobra* to see what it was like to race in local boats."

Melvin continues, "After high school, I got certified as a building contractor. I got my experience in the field and worked my way up the ranks. Most recently, I'm involved in a 30 million dollar residential project."

An ordained minister, Melvin's major priorities are family, church and sailing. He is best known through the church and the sailing community. "Sailing (racing) is a sport that I love but I retired from it 20 years ago. I took on the role with the kids more as a ministry to see these youth sailors succeed in life. I'm more like a Big Brother counselor and father figure to kids who come from single-parent families. It isn't just the sailing that gets me going." A child asked one day, "Mr. Higgins, could you be my father?"

"If you can dream it, you can achieve it. It can be reached through sailing. There are so many benefits that you can get from sailing. We watch our kids and see the attitude change, the behavior change. We see the glow in their eyes when we travel. We see them do well. Regardless of social standing or background, which island you come from, which country or family you were born into, if you want something badly enough, go after it! There are people who will come forward and assist our young people to reach where they want to go. I definitely love the kids even more than I love sailing."

Melvin Higgins embodies dedication. He embraces the lasting ties that bind him and his country to a brighter future by investing in youth.

#### Innovation out of The Bahamas

- Teen retention through transitioning youth from Optimists to Lasers and Sunfish and empowering teens as trainers and chaperones.
- Regionalized support empowering all junior programs to compete in Nationals and other regional regattas.

To see how they've done it, visit [bahsailing.org](http://bahsailing.org)'s Detailed History tab. And, they mean detailed! Insightful details from which any new junior sailing program can learn.

Youth2Adult — Y2A — is a series of articles celebrating sailing's role in youth development. Ellen Ebert Birrell attributes her opportunity to cruise the Caribbean aboard Boldly Go with partner Jim Hutchins to life skills built in childhood. Believing swimming and sailing are essentials for island youth, she supports junior sailing and serves on the Caribbean Sailing Association Sailing Development Committee.

Visit [caribbean-sailing.com/youth/youth-programs](http://caribbean-sailing.com/youth/youth-programs) for more information.

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