

# The Newport Daily News

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By Joe Baker | Staff writer | **COVER | FEATURE** | Thursday, Aug 4, 2016



• Dave Hansen Staff photos

Above: Gold Star Teens take a launch Wednesday to their sailboats in Newport Harbor.

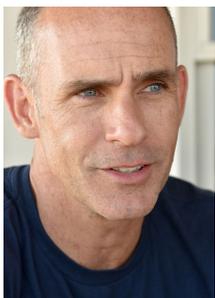
NEWPORT, RI -- Growing up in Nebraska, the 17-year-old girl had never been on a sailboat until last year. On her first sea adventure, in Newport, she hurriedly grabbed onto the rail the first time the boat heeled over. That's when the Capt. Ron McBain, the ship's captain, asked if she wanted to take the helm.

"I was scared and nervous," said Morgan, now 18, as she sat at a table on the deck of the Newport Yacht Club on Wednesday. "But it was an awesome experience!"

"And she drove like a pro," said Capt. Dave Pickering, who mentors Morgan and other Gold Star Teens (GST's) in what is billed as a weeklong sailing, healing adventure on Narragansett Bay.

Morgan's father, a serviceman, was killed when she was 16. She has had some rough times since. But last year, when she was one of six teens who took part in the second Ocean State Gold Star Teens Sailing Adventure, she found something that got her outside of her shell. It was such a revelation for her that she volunteered to come back this year to be a C.I.T. (Counselor In Training) learning to help other Gold Star Teens.

The program does not release the teens' full names or the branch of service their parents were in to preserve their privacy. "I didn't really have any expectations (last year). I came into it blind," Morgan said. "I had the best time ever and it's helped me more than I can say".



Col. Patrick Powers

This year Victoria, 18, of Florida, is an old salt, taking part in her third adventure program. Also a C.I.T., she now she takes charge of one of the program's two boats, provided by SALTY. She has tabbed her GST deckhands, "my ducklings." Her father died in Iraq when she was just 6. When she took part in her first program, it was a life-altering experience, she said.

"That very first year impacted me so much I don't see how I could be as happy as I am without this sailing adventure," she said. "I knew I had to come back and help other GST's."

In the first year of the program, which is completely funded by donations and sponsors, the organizers rented a house in Jamestown and the group took day trips. The local community dived right in to support the teens, Powers said. The Newport Yacht Club "opened its doors to us," he said. Unlike other retreats that aim to get the kids talking about their experiences, this one is geared more toward doing than talking, Powers said.

After that first year, the program left the land behind and the teens live on their boats. They have plenty of shore-based activities. This week, they have toured the Naval War College's simulator and steered destroyers through choppy waves and busy ports.

They climbed the rappelling tower on the Navy base — Morgan made it up but passed on rappelling down, taking the stairs instead. On Tuesday night, they had dinner at the Newport Yacht Club and Newport Mayor Jeanne-Marie Napolitano attended to welcome the teens. They then took a "ghost tour" of Newport.

But it is the lessons of the sea that really hit home, Powers said. On the water, they are part of a team that has to work together. During the exhilaration of sailing there isn't much room for dwelling on sadness. And what better place to get the full measure of the experience than in the sailing capital of the world?

"Sailing here is like an alternate universe," Powers said. "We get to show them there is a huge world out there full of really cool stuff. It's great." And what better way to share this adventure than with other teens who know your pain, who can relate to that pain?

"I like to be around Gold Star teens," Morgan said. "We have all been through the same things. It makes you feel like you're all in the same boat." "Literally the same boat!," said Richard, a 16-year-old GST from Florida.



Capt. Dave Pickering,  
S.A.L.T.Y.'s Founder

It's all about giving these teens the ability to experience something that might help them cope with the tragedies in their young lives, Pickering said. What made it all worthwhile was exemplified last year when one young girl hugged him at the end of the week and said, "It's been hard not having a dad, but I want to come back here and help kids like I've been helped."

"That's the kind of paycheck I'm cashing these days," Pickering said, his voice cracking with emotion. "It's a tremendous privilege to help these very deserving teens whose parent made the ultimate sacrifice for us and our freedom."

Anyone wishing to donate to the program can send checks payable to SALTY, with "GOLD STAR TEENS" in the memo line, to 2500 Post Road – Ships History Center, Warwick, RI 02886. For more information, call Capt. Dave Pickering at (401) 742-5039 or email him at [saltyfoundation@gmail.com](mailto:saltyfoundation@gmail.com). All donations are fully federal and state tax-deductible as allowed by law.