

Sailor survived 'Pirate Alley,' worried mom

February 28, 2011 | By LORI BASHEDA

If it wasn't for the shattered bones in his leg, he never would have been stuck in bed for three months.

And if he wasn't stuck in bed, his mom probably wouldn't have given him a magazine about boat building to keep him busy while his friends were outside playing baseball.

And if he never got the magazine, he wouldn't have spent his days dreaming about building one of those boats and just sailing away.

But dreaming is one thing, doing is another.

And that's what this story is about.

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Larry Jacobson was 13 years old when he fell on the bunny hill at Big Bear one winter and shattered two bones in his right leg. Doctors encased him in a hip-to-toe cast. For three months. That's like three years in kid time.

This was 1967, before video games and the Disney Channel. His mom, Julia, brought home magazines to cheer him up. But only one interested him. It was full of boats.

"I lay there looking out the window and started imagining boats that could take me places, because I was stuck in one place."

His mom is 88 now and living at Leisure World in Seal Beach. But she will never forget what she told him.

"I said, 'Larry. That ocean is very dangerous.' "

About the time he got the cast off, Larry's older brother Jeff came home with a Styrofoam dinghy he found in a trash bin. It was an 8-foot-long Sea Snark that had seen better days.

"To me, it looked like a yacht," Larry says.

He painted it bright yellow and bought a sailing rig. Then he took it to Alamitos Bay in Long Beach near his home and taught himself to sail.

"Oh, Mamma, I love it," he announced when he got home. "I want to go further."

"I said, 'What do you mean further?' " his mother recalls.

Across the ocean, he told her.

"Oh, you can't do that," she remembers telling him. "That's very dangerous. You must never think of that."



With the money he made mowing lawns and working at his dad's plastics factory for 75 cents an hour, Larry saved up \$900 to buy a [Hoble Cat 14](#) by the time he was 16. One day his mom was cooking dinner when she got a phone call from her boy telling her he was on Catalina.

"Larry, get in that ship and come back!" was her reply.

But every day he returned to the ocean. And every day his mom let him.

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When the 3 o'clock school bell rang, he would ride his 10-speed to the boat yard. And after sailing, he would bike to the marina where the big boats lived. Standing behind the locked metal gate, he would stare, imagining what it would be like to go sailing off on one of them.

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After graduating in '72, Larry got on the UCI sailing team. He won races, but his heart wasn't in competition. He quit the team, finished his history degree, headed up to [Berkeley](#) and signed on as crew for a sailboat crossing the Pacific. Back in the Bay Area, he started an adventure travel company, taking people to New Zealand to white-water raft. In 1986, he started another company, organizing incentive trips for high performers at companies.

Sitting behind his desk, he would gaze at pictures of cruising boats that he had torn from the pages of magazines and taped to his walls. Then, one day, burned out on business, he sold the company and spent \$200,000 to buy a used 50-foot sailboat.

It was on.

Friends and family gathered near his home for a ceremony to rename the boat. Larry asked Poseidon and Neptune to take back the old name before asking them to bless the boat's new name. A canvas was pulled back and his mom pointed.

"Hey, that's my name!"

Julia, the boat read.

Everyone cheered. Julia cried. It didn't butter her up enough, though, to stop asking him to stay put.

"I said, 'There's pirates out there.'

"And he says, 'I'm not worried about pirates.'

"And I said, 'But I am!'

"I tell you, I was out of my mind. I have five kids and this one was causing me so much trouble. Oh, Lord."

She wasn't the only one trying to talk Larry out of going. Brothers and friends told him he was crazy to give up his career and home for a risky boat ride.

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In 2001, Larry and his friends Ken Smith and Patrik Hendrickson sailed under the Golden Gate Bridge and headed out – to the Long Beach Yacht Club.

"We stopped right where I used to stand behind the gate as a boy. Except this time I was the one standing at the helm."

Then they were off. Off to be chased by 10-foot [Komodo Dragons](#) in Indonesia. Off to meet people who lived in grass huts. Off to eat tiny crabs that were still moving around in their mouths when they crunched down on them, just like the locals did.

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The scariest moments came when they had to hand steer their 25-ton boat for 36 hours in heavy seas, with waves crashing over them, after losing their auto pilot deep in the South Pacific. And the time they had to harness themselves to their boat in 2- and 3-story-high waves and full gale winds in the Red Sea.

They also went as fast as they could through "Pirate Alley," the stretch off Somalia where four Americans were killed last week by pirates. "We were so scared. We ran with radio silence and no lights. It was almost two days on edge with no sleep."

After three years, they ran out of money, so Larry sold his house back in Berkeley. That kept them going another few years. By now, Patrik had gone home. And Larry and Ken had fallen in love.

"Can you say that in Orange County?" he asked.

The journey ended in 2007, six years and 40,450 blue water miles after it started. Back in the Bay Area, Larry sold his boat so he could afford an apartment where he then wrote a book about living the dream. "The Boy Behind the Gate" came out last month.

It's based mostly on journal entries and e-mails sent while on the open seas. His mom, by the way, e-mailed him every day for six years: *Are you taking your vitamins? When are you coming home?*

Larry hopes the book will inspire people to live their dream.

"No one's going to do it for you. You have to make your own dreams come true."

No matter what your mom says.

[Click here for Larry Jacobson's website.](#)

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