

JOURNEY ON THE SEA



BY CLARE KNIGHTON

Aotearoa is an island nation with more than 15,000 kilometres of coastline (only nine other countries have more). It's no wonder so many of us love the water. But activities like swimming, surfing, fishing, and sailing all involve risk. On average, more than a hundred New Zealanders drown each year.

When Jeff Chapman, a parent at Titahi Bay Intermediate, heard his school owned some small sailing boats that weren't being used, he saw a great opportunity. He would teach the students to sail – and to stay safe while doing it. Although the school is just across the road from Te Awarua-o-Porirua (Porirua Harbour), many students had never been out on its waters. Along with fellow sailor Jenni Bedford, Jeff set up an organisation they named Te Ara Moana. The name means “journey (or pathway) on the sea”.



JACKSON

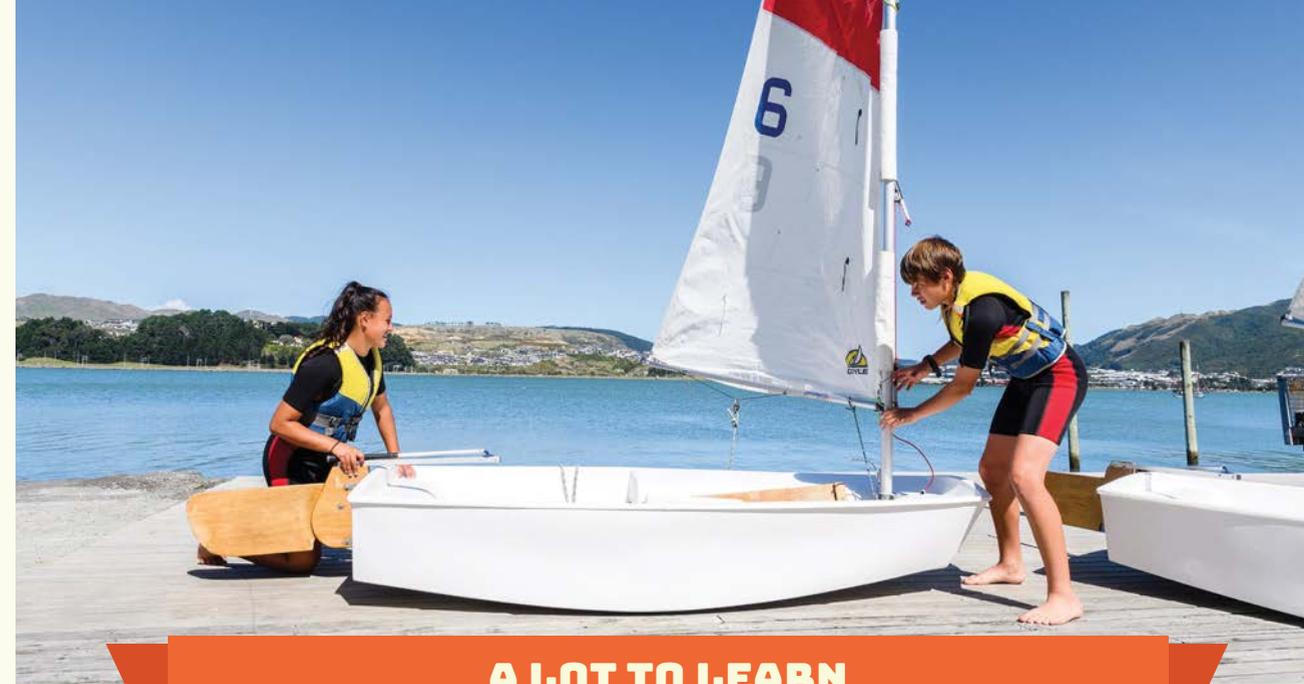
JACK

MISCHA

FIRST STEPS

Te Ara Moana offered its first course in 2015. Since then, dozens of students have learnt how to sail the school's Optimists. Jeff and Jenni know all about New Zealand's grim statistics when it comes to the water. They place a big emphasis on safety, but they also want students to have fun. "We teach our kids how to kayak and snorkel," says Jenni, "and how to catch and cook a fish. They love learning new things."

A sailor needs to be confident in the water, but most of Te Ara Moana's students can't swim. Some don't like wading in past their knees. To build confidence, the students spend their first session making rafts and fighting "gladiator style" on paddleboards. Once they can cope with falling in the water – and being underwater – they're ready to try out the Optimists.



A LOT TO LEARN

An Optimist is a small dinghy with a rudder and sail, specially designed for young sailors. Jackson was in year 8 at Titahi Bay Intermediate when he first tried sailing. He was the perfect age for an Optimist, but this didn't stop him from feeling nervous. No one in Jackson's family sailed ("We play rugby and ride motorbikes"), and while Optimists are small, Jackson thought they looked complicated. "The boats had poles and ropes and pulleys – it was really daunting," he remembers.

In fact, there is a lot to learn when it comes to sailing. An Optimist moves by catching the wind in its sail, which means a sailor needs to know about wind direction and how to adjust the sail. Getting used to the swinging boom

is another challenge, although Jeff says all sailors quickly learn to duck. Then there's the risk of capsizing, something first-time sailor Mischa was worried about. A turning boat usually tilts, and a sailor needs to master the knack of repositioning their weight to avoid falling in. "Sometimes this means leaning right out," Mischa says.

To make life easier, Jeff and Jenni always buddy up their sailors. Jeff's son, Jack, first sailed in year 7. He agrees that working with a buddy really helps when you're learning to sail. "It means you have the space to focus on different skills," he says. "One person can steer while the other person handles the sail. Then you can switch."

The Statistics

**MORE
THAN 100**

The average number
of people who drown
each year

**15-24
YEARS**

The age group
most at risk of
drowning

**80%
MALE**

People who drown

**200
METRES**

The distance people
should be able to
swim

1 IN 5

The number of
ten-year-olds who can
swim 200 metres

1 IN 2

The number of adults
who CAN'T swim
25 metres

SAILING ON LAND

Before going out on the water, students practise basic sailing skills on land. They start with steering, which means learning to use the rudder. This doesn't work the way most people expect. "To turn the boat left, you push the rudder to the right – and vice versa," Mischa explains. "It's a system that takes a lot of getting used to."

Learning to set the sail comes next. A sail's position changes depending on whether the boat is sailing away from or into the wind. Sailing downwind,

away from the wind, is called running. Jackson says that running is pretty simple. "You just set the sail out to the side and that's it."

Heading into the wind requires a different approach or the sail will just flap around. To avoid this, sailors take a zigzag path, first heading slightly to one side of the wind before turning (or tacking) across it. "Sailing in a zigzag means that the wind will always blow across your boat," says Jackson.



WATER SAFETY

Basic skills, according to Jeff and Jenni, always include water safety. Students are taught to recognise the signs of hypothermia, and they learn to tell if someone's in trouble on the water. Everyone who's done the course knows it's a no-brainer to wear a life jacket, and they're all familiar with the three "stays" if they fall overboard: Stay calm. Stay with your boat. Stay with your mate.

Jackson now feels more confident when he swims at the beach. He's learnt how to handle a rip. "Staying calm is the most important thing to remember," he says. "Don't try to swim against the rip. Swim across it. Or float and put your hand up."

This advice was used by Jack when he fell out of his father's boat on Porirua Harbour. He ended up in a deep channel, being pulled out to sea. "I was worried Dad wouldn't be able to find me, and I started to panic," he remembers. At first, Jack tried to swim against the current, but then he remembered what they'd been taught. "I stayed calm and didn't fight the water. By the time Dad picked me up, I was feeling OK."



Anatomy of an Optimist



Sailing Terms

- beating:** taking a zigzag path so that a boat moves back and forth across the wind
- hiking:** leaning off the high side of a tilting boat for balance
- jibing:** turning a boat when it's sailing away from the wind (the opposite of tacking)
- luffing:** when the sails flap because a boat is facing into the wind
- running:** sailing with the wind directly behind you
- tacking:** turning a boat when it's sailing into the wind (the opposite of jibing)
- trimming:** adjusting the sail to make the best use of the wind



THE REAL DEAL

After three sessions, the students are keen to try the real deal: sailing on the harbour. Jackson's first time out on the water was a huge success – he even managed the tiller and sail on his own while his buddy took a break. "It was only for a short time, but it felt really good, controlling the boat by myself," he remembers.

Mischa was also thrilled by her first experience on the harbour. She was able to overcome two fears: falling out and being hit on the head by the boom! She liked that Jenni and Jeff were always right there, in the support boat, giving advice the whole time. "I knew everything would be OK if I listened to them," she says.



SAILING GRADUATES

At the end of the course, everyone celebrates with a day on Wellington Harbour in Jenni's launch, *Patricia J*. The students explore the harbour's small islands and enjoy snorkelling, swimming, and fishing. If they're lucky, they'll cook what they catch. It's an experience no one will ever forget.

Jack now loves sailing. He's a new member of Yachting New Zealand and tries to get out in a boat as much as possible. It helps that his father's an equally keen sailor. Jackson really likes being on the water, too, though he isn't ready to trade in his motorbike

just yet. Mischa isn't sure what her sailing future holds.

Jeff and Jenni have been working with Titahi Bay Intermediate for three years. Their next goal is for all local students to attend a sailing course. "Local kids in local water" is Te Ara Moana's new motto. And whether any future students take to sailing or not, Jeff and Jenni hope they'll all learn to make good choices around the water. "Know your limits and never take unnecessary risks," Jeff says. "It's best to avoid trouble in the first place."



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by Clare Knighton

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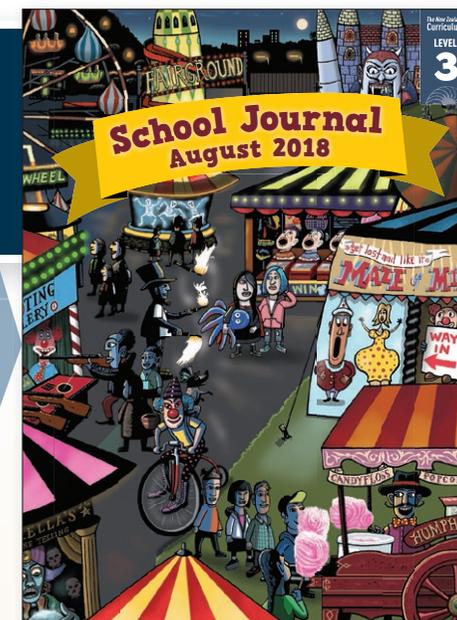
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