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WINTER 2024

true bonds

A boat captain reflects on the rewards of working with his teen daughter

Words by Ben Doerr

As I untie dock lines, toss them on deck and climb aboard my charter boat True, I look to the helm with a beaming smile. Behind the wheel is my 15-year-old daughter, Aria. She eases the 44-foot sailboat away from the dock in Eagle Harbor with six guests aboard for a two-hour sail (the third that day), and I can't help but reflect on how much I love doing this work with her.

I never put pressure on either of my kids to work full-time with me at my charter outfit, Sail Bainbridge, which offers day and sunset sails as well as overnight excursions on Puget Sound. So I was thrilled when Aria approached my wife and me about clearing her summer schedule and spending the 2023 high season working aboard our 32,000-pound vessel. I knew instantly that having her aboard would be a fulfilling experience for both of us.

Aria had already demonstrated that she was motivated, capable and a natural at many aspects of the work. At 10 or 11, she was practically begging me to show her how to varnish the teak trim on the boat and loved the feel of the brush in hand, transforming wood into this high-gloss thing of beauty. What I quickly discovered is that this young woman needs no guidance on how to interact with guests. She engages with them effortlessly, answering questions about her life on boats, sharing the history of the harbor and fun facts about the seals popping up around us. All that while maneuvering True through the harbor, confidently steering around anchored vessels, rowing teams and kayakers.

In all of my consideration of having Aria aboard, I did not account for what a great hang she would be! Yes, she's an incredible



asset to the business, but, wow, do we have a good time to boot. There's a thrill in seeing her move with ease onto the foredeck to handle some task at the mast as we scream upwind, flying full sail on a windy, blue sky day. Just as thrilling is sharing the experience of orcas celebrating a successful hunt just off our bow. I always catch her with a big smile, her hair tangling in the wind. We share, often without needing to speak about it, a deep appreciation for the life we live, the work we do and the magical place in which we get to do it.

There are tangible, real world objectives for her working with me, and it's not just cleaning toilets, doing dishes, varnishing, swabbing the decks and packing sails away. As she continues to show this deep motivation and capability around learning to run the boat, she opens up the opportunity for working toward becoming a licensed commercial captain herself. Plus, there's something deeply special about sharing what you love with your child. When your kid shows a shared interest, it's like a light turns on, a spark for a point of connection.

I'm well aware that Aria could change her mind and her interests at the drop of a hat. That very realization roots me deep in the appreciation of the moment. I know how lucky I am to spend nearly every day of each sailing season doing what I love and engaging people with our home waters, exploring and laughing my way through it all with this strong, big-hearted, deep-feeling daughter of mine. 📍