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# Client Spotlight: Call of the Sea Teaches Students Self-Reliance and Teamwork

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**Call of the Sea's Mission is to "inspire young people to unleash their potential through experiential, environmental education under sail." What was the inspiration behind founding the program?**

Alan Olson started the organization because he believed kids could learn teamwork and appreciate the waters of the San Francisco Bay by spending time on a boat learning to sail. We're presently not teaching sailing per se, though kids do learn the basics of sailing while primarily learning about the environment. At-risk youth especially need the opportunity to push themselves and to gain a sense of self-worth. When students are able to take control of a large vessel, it can be an incredibly self-empowering experience. If you look at the nine counties in the area, less than five percent of students have ever been out on a boat in the bay.

**Call of the Sea's programs range in length from a few hours to several days. What can students expect to learn?**

During the school year, we have three-hour sails that teach environmental education courses and meet the California state standards for teaching science and math to fourth and fifth graders. The students break into groups and conduct experiments on board to learn about plankton, marine animals and other things. They also get to hoist the sails. In the summer time, we have three- to five-day voyages for teens to learn more about sailing as well as test the environment. Some of the older students will get to plan a cruise, map it and steer the vessel while under supervision of the crew. Getting to manage a massive sailboat is quite an experience.

**The program works with well-known partners throughout California and the country. What have these partnerships allowed you to do that you couldn't do before?**

The partnerships complement both our programs by combining the partner's talented educators and Call to the Sea's creative lesson plans and crew. There are many organizations, such as the Marine Mammal Center or NatureBridge, that touch on the environment but don't have ships or vessels that go out on the water, so we are basically an extension of their present programs. Partnerships with the California Academy of Science, Headlands Institute and Camp Sea Lab have allowed us to expand our reach to students all around Northern California and the west coast of California.

**What has been one of the biggest challenges to running the program, and what's been one of your proudest achievements to date?**

As in many nonprofit organizations, the lack of sufficient funding remains our biggest challenge. Educational budgets have been flat, so it's hard to keep up with rising expenses. We do have to charge schools and students for our programs, but over 20 percent of those taking part are offered scholarships. We have to raise a lot of money to meet that goal. Each year, we rely on donations to contribute about 30 to 40 percent of our budget. That's fairly low compared to some nonprofit organizations, such as a local ballet or symphony, which might get about 30 percent of their operating budget from ticket sales and 70 percent from contributions. The new boat continues to be a fundraising challenge. It needs an additional \$1.25 million in order to complete construction in early 2017.

I think the proudest part of what we accomplish with the students is providing an environmental educational experience on the water. It's a different way of educating both adults and students. We've been fortunate that a number of former students have gone on to maritime academies or major in marine biology. It's gratifying to see the results of these young people going through our programs.

**You have experience running a business and serving on the boards of several nonprofit organizations. What advice would you give someone who wants to make a similar move or who has an idea for a nonprofit but no experience?**

I've found that you need a complementary group of dedicated people. Our new ship Project Director, Alan Olson, is a licensed sea captain and boat builder, and my background has been in managing technology companies. Thus, we complement each other in meeting the organization's mission. Similarly, on our board we have a maritime attorney, a retired admiral, several business executives, a medical doctor and a certified public accountant. We try to populate the board with unique talents that supplement what we can afford to spend on outside services in order to run the organization effectively.

Thomas Edison famously said, "A vision without execution is a hallucination." Fundraising is a very important part of my job. If someone is not willing to spend a lot of time on the fundraising aspect, then the vision is useless without the required execution. I've been known by my friends as a professional beggar, but it doesn't bother me because I believe in the unique service we are providing the community.