Youth learn the ins and outs of sailing through inaugural HCS&R program

by Jenny Haglund

EAST TAWAS — “It’s just amazing; such an opportunity for the kids to enjoy the water here in Tawas,” remarked Mary Gmeiner, an HCS&R member of the first every youth sailing program hosted by Heritage Coast Sailing & Rowing (HCS&R).

Gmeiner, an HCS&R member and certified sailing instructor through U.S. Sailing, was on hand to teach the youngsters the ropes – both literally and figuratively – of navigating the water by boat.

HCS&R, a nonprofit organization based in Alabaster Township, initiated the youth program on July 23, and the lessons will wrap up this Friday, Aug. 3.

The training has been taking place on Lake Huron, at the East Tawas State Harbor, “And the kids are absolutely loving it,” noted Gmeiner.

Organizer Rebecca Buchanan shared that for two weeks, Monday through Friday, two different age groups are taking part in sailing lessons for three hours each day. The program was open to participants age 7-17, with the younger group joining in on morning sessions, and the older children taking their classes in the afternoon.

According to Buchanan, the youngsters have had a riot training on both land and in the water, as well as learning about knot tying, terminology and other key elements of sailing.

In the first day, alone, Buchanan said there were about 30 adults who came up to HCS&R members and asked about lessons for them, as well.

Buchanan, Gmeiner and HCS&R member Kaye Chartier have all pointed out that the nonprofit is looking to continue and grow the program in the future, and they hope the new youth event is the first of many.

While some of the children – 15 in all – have been on sailboats before, organizers say it was the first time any of them had ever sailed on their own.

Chartier added that the youngsters have been engaging in every aspect of the process, from pulling the boats to the water on dollies, to rigging up the vessels, launching the watercraft and sailing in the lake.

“By the third day, they were all in boats by themselves,” she said.

“We’re learning all the sailing skills,” Gmeiner elaborated, noting that this involves a three-part program.

“What we do first is we do what’s called a chalk talk. So we talk about the skill and learn it that way. Then we actually do the skill on land, then we do it in the boat,” she explained.

“So we already practiced on land what it would feel like to tack, that kind of thing. We have a boat on shore, we lean it up, we roll it so they know how the boat will feel when it rolls,” she continued.

“The kids have learned how to rig the boats already and we’re only in day three,” she said, when this reporter met with the group on July 25. “They’re learning very quickly.”

As for the actual vessels, Gmeiner said the two-person Hunter Xcite sailboats measure about 10 feet long and are of a very modern style. The design is

FAST LEARNERS – Event organizers couldn’t give enough compliments to the sailing program students, who range in age from 7-17, for catching on to the lessons so fast. The younger group, which participates in morning classes, sailed on their own after three days while the older participants, who trained in the afternoons, were ready to take to the water by day two.

BREAK TIME – The youth sailors make their way to shore for a quick break, after spending time on the water during their first independent sailing experience. They received their lessons from Mary Gmeiner, a certified sailing instructor and member of Heritage Coast Sailing & Rowing.

While she was in her boat, Gmeiner threw tennis balls to the children in the sailboats.

“As soon as I do, then you have to change direction and throw it back to me,” she told them before the exercise.

If the tennis ball didn’t make it into the boat, the students had to go get it for Gmeiner. “You sail your boat over and pick it up,” she advised.

One thing she wanted to stress is that the program would not have been possible if it weren’t for the generosity of helpers and donors.

“We have a large number of volunteers – that’s how this program is going well,” she said, adding that there have been six volunteers every day, who rotate their time to accommodate each other’s.

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work schedules. HCS&R member Doug Lentz stepped it up a notch, committing every day to being a volunteer and even bringing in his personal boat to use during the program.

Gmeiner explained that Lentz was there to stop the children if they traveled too far, show them where they need to be and so on. “She and her husband were actually the people who wanted to get it started,” Gmeiner then praised of Buchanan.

According to Gmeiner, Buchanan and her husband are very active in HCS&R, they have helped rebuild boats and have also assisted with refinishing the sailing boats used for the youth program. Gmeiner said HCS&R members not only traveled out of state to obtain the sailboats, but also repainted them, put on new symbols, hooked up all new lines, checked the rigging to make sure it was safe for the children and more.

“And that’s all off of people’s donations,” Gmeiner said, of how both the sailboats and the dollies used to transport them were acquired. “We have wonderful volunteers. It’s just running really well,” she expressed.

“It’s going better than we even had imagined,” she continued, noting that the program has greatly exceeded the expectations of those from HCS&R.

“They don’t want to get out of the boats!” Gmeiner added of the young sailors, saying they often have to be reminded to take a break for a snack or to use the restroom because they’re too busy having so much fun. “They’re just loving it. They’re doing really good,” said Lentz of the students.

“The children seem to agree, as one youngster was overheard yelling to another on the water, “You’re doing a really good job!”

One example of this was witnessed with Oliver Devereaux, 8, Whittemore, who confidently set off on his first independent excursion last week.

The small sailor effortlessly put up his own sail, maneuvered his boat to and from the shore and coasted across the water like a pro. Devereaux’s mom watched him and her other children who participated in the program, saying that she is also looking to become a member of HCS&R.

Ryan Chequer, 8, who used to live in Bermuda but recently moved to the Tawas area, agreed with Devereaux that the best part about the program so far has been doing the actual sailing, all on their own.

For more information about HCS&R, visit www.heritage-23.org, or contact Dave Wentworth or Leo Chartier at 460-2642.