

News

Children of the Sea

The O’Neill Sea Odyssey allows children to learn the ropes—about life, sailing, and the sea

by **Bruce Willey**

One by one, 28 fifth graders from Santa Cruz Gardens Elementary file on board the 65-foot O’Neill catamaran. Jack O’Neill, founder of the O’Neill Sea Odyssey program, greets each of the kids with a gentle slap on the hand. Little do they know they are slapping the hand of a surfing icon, a pioneer that made surfing possible in cold water by inventing the wetsuit.



“Awesome,” says one of the kids, looking around the boat once she is on board.

With their identical lifejackets, the children waddle like excited penguins to the front of the boat and sit on the large trampoline between the hulls. Tim O’Neill, who skippers the Sea Odyssey, is Jack’s son. Also on board are teachers from the school, marine biologist and ecology instructors Laura Barnes and Nikki Brooks, navigational expert Loren Fontinell, the program’s executive director Dan Haifley, and Jack’s personal assistant Joan Wenglikowski.

After some safety issues are explained—no sumo wrestling or walking upright on the trampoline—Jack walks to the front of the boat and begins an impassioned lecture. The fifth graders are captivated, hanging to every word. Quite probably they’re most curious why this man, with a black patch over one eye, looks so much like a pirate on this ultra-modern boat. A parrot on his shoulder would not be out of order. “We’re going to turn this boat around and go out into the open ocean,” he says. “We could go to Hawaii or China on this boat, but we’re going to show you that we have a living ocean, and that we’ve got to take care of it. We need it. Most of our oxygen comes from the ocean. We’ve got to take care of it for the fish, and we need it for sailing and surfing.”

The line tying the boat to the dock is tossed overboard and Tim turns the boat towards the open ocean, passing the green-striped harbor lighthouse on the way. The children stay put on the trampoline watching the water pass below them. We may not be going to China or Hawaii, yet this is, literally, a three-hour tour, and anything could happen. Most likely it will be an education about the ocean that won’t soon be forgotten.

“Classroom learning is important, but the subjects come to life on the Sea Odyssey,” Haifley says. “This is a living classroom because all the subjects, math, science, ecology, come to life.”

The O’Neill Sea Odyssey program was started in 1996 and to date has served more than 23,000 fourth through sixth graders from schools in Northern and Central California. The program gives priority to classes that don’t have hands-on science programs. “We’ve been in the surf business for 50 years,” says O’Neill. “And this is a good way to give something back. We already had the boat and the program really took off from there.”

We pass the Santa Cruz Wharf, where sea lions bark out their territories in the distance. The fifth graders are then told to break ranks and form into three groups. One group will study navigation down in the cabin, another will learn about ecology, and still another will learn the fascinating world of marine biology. After a set time the groups will switch and move to the next lesson. It all happens like a well-oiled oceanic machine minus the oil.

“We don’t need to pontificate,” Haifley says. “Everything is factual.” Factual indeed. Brooks lowers a plankton catching net into the water, letting it trail 20 feet behind the boat. She pulls it in after a few minutes and dumps the contents into some beakers. Passing the saltwater around, Brooks asks the kids to taste it while she explains the difference between zooplankton (animal) and phyto (plant) plankton “Can you think of any animals in the Monterey Bay that feed on plankton?” she asks the group.

“Whales,” says a girl, her arm wiggling frantically in the air. “Good!” Brooks says. “Some whales have teeth, others don’t. What are the whales called that don’t have teeth?” “Baleen whales,” says a boy. This group is sharp and has obviously been doing their homework. “Right,” says Brooks. “And they have brush-like mouths made of keratin just like your fingernails.”

In one collective effort the kids all check their fingernails and see them differently for the first time. One boy stares at his nails with a furrowed brow and you can almost hear his synapses glow with questions—*fingernails, baleen, whales, fingernails*.

Meanwhile Laura Barnes is giving a talk about how garbage gets into the ocean and how a cigarette butt or a Coke can, for example, can kill marine life. In the back of the boat, Loren Fontinell is having the fifth graders sight their compasses on the buoy, bobbing in the mist.

Elizabeth Carlton, one of the teachers at the school, says the Sea Odyssey trip interfaces ideally with their end of the school year curriculum. “This is the perfect way to learn,” she says wistfully, staring out across the water, far from the hectic classroom setting.

In an era of educational cuts, the program is still thriving in part because of large corporate and private donations. Everyone from the Packard Foundation, Wells Fargo, Citibank, Bank of America, the Adam Webster Fund for Special Needs Kids, and a

recent contribution from Starbucks, to name a few, have made the program possible. Jack has even opened a thrift store on 41st Avenue to help with the costs—about \$75 a child each sailing class.

The program is also remodeling their Education Center at the harbor next to the Crow's Nest Restaurant, an upstairs space where the classes go after the boat trip for further study. The renovation is set to begin construction this winter and will add more space to the existing, somewhat cramped quarters.

O'Neill says that many of the children have never even been to the beach. "Most of them have never been on a boat," he adds. "So it's a brand new experience. They listen to you and they retain the information we give them. It really works and it opens their eyes."

The O'Neill boat raises its giant spinnaker and Tim sails her toward the harbor. A group of porpoises cut through the water and a lone sea otter cracks a crab on its belly.

Once on land the class again divides into three groups to continue their ocean education. Barnes pours colored laundry detergent and colored water onto a model of a small community complete with cars, a farm and streams flowing into a bay filled with plastic fish and whales. When the kids make it rain with their spray bottles the ocean turns dirty.

In another room, Fontinell is following up with his navigation lecture, showing the morning's journey on a nautical map of the Monterey Bay. And Brooks has the water that the children sampled and tasted under a microscope, hooked up to a large monitor screen. Magnified plankton swims across the screen like giant sea monsters, and elicit a few screams from the children. "Holy Cow! We were drinking that?" one of the boys says.

For the O'Neill Sea Odyssey it's another class, another generation gaining an appreciation of the oceans for years to come.
