

THE BEACON HILL TIMES

THERE ARE NO TIMES LIKE THESE TIMES

Beacon Hill sailors Rick and Nonnie Burnes take to the water for a good cause

by Jenny Desai

Tuesday, September 05th 2006



Friendly Competition

On dry land, Acorn Street residents Rick and Nonnie Burnes have made a life from doing good while doing well. But it's on the open sea that they live well while doing good: devoted sailors, last year they spent their money—and their talent—locally, by sailing in the Harbor Alliance's first annual Boston Harbor Islands Regatta. Come September 30, when the second annual race is scheduled, they plan to race again. And they're hoping for even fiercer, family-friendly competition this time.

The Harbor Alliance's mission is to maintain and promote Boston's Harbor Islands, a little-known network of islands that punctuate the marine area just outside Boston. Once much used and abused, particularly as military installations in the 18th and 19th centuries, some of the islands—like Thompson's Island—still have intact school or institutional structures. Returned to their original state, or as close to it as possible, the islands are an invaluable natural resource for the people who visit them.

Invaluable they may be, but maintaining the islands costs money. And that's where the Regatta—and the Burneses—enter the picture. "Last year we got a call from Enid Beal, an Island Alliance board member who was a classmate of mine in college. The topic of holding a regatta to raise money and public awareness came up, and we were in," Nonnie Burnes remembers.

"Having a regatta that used the islands as a course seemed like a fabulous idea," Rick Burnes said. "The islands are a magical part of Boston that most people don't know about. Last year it was just lovely, being in this very rural, almost wild setting—and it looked like you could just reach out and touch the Boston skyline, it seemed so close. It was really special."

The scenery didn't exactly distract the Burnes clan last year: with five grandchildren on board, the pair "won a couple of trophies, including first place, woman skipper," Rick Burnes says. "There are lots of prizes handed out—it's a race, and it's fun, but the emphasis is really on family: there are lots of kids on the boats, and it's a really good time."

The Burneses' idea of a good time on the water, it should be noted, also includes sailing of a slightly more serious—and competitive—nature. In 1986, along with their three kids, who were then between the ages of 15 and 20, the Burneses stopped in Iceland for supplies on the way to Europe and met up with the country's Education Minister, who remains a close family friend. More recently, this spring the intrepid pair raced from Newport to Bermuda, along with some 270 other boats, and managed to place first in their class.

Why do they do it? In addition to a love of adventure, the Burneses share a commitment to high-octane careers and community commitments. Rick is a venture capitalist who also spends his time in leadership positions at the Boston Museum of Science and the Boston Foundation. Nonnie, a Superior Court judge, has been a practicing lawyer for 20 years and a judge for 10. They both say they love what they do—and they love the escape that life on the water provides.

“Sailing is all-consuming. You can’t possibly worry about what you haven’t gotten done when you’re out on the water. You just feel free, with the endless horizon out there to look at,” Nonnie says.

Endless horizon and no e-mail: while their boats are equipped with sophisticated computer-aided navigation tools, the Burneses make a point to live Internet-free on the water. And they make a point of being partners, on sea as well as land.

“I’m really not interested in doing any long-distance, solo sailing,” Rick says. “The boat is a microcosm, and my wife is a critical part of the crew. Making a boat move involves technique and it involves teamwork—it’s one of those sports, and one of those skills, that you can keep growing in.”

For her part, Nonnie agrees. Though she didn’t start sailing until she met Rick, she’s now a devotee. “It’s terrific—it’s about the best escape there is,” she says. “We’ve been sailing together for a very long time, and we’ve had lots of adventures together. We’re always up for another adventure or two.”