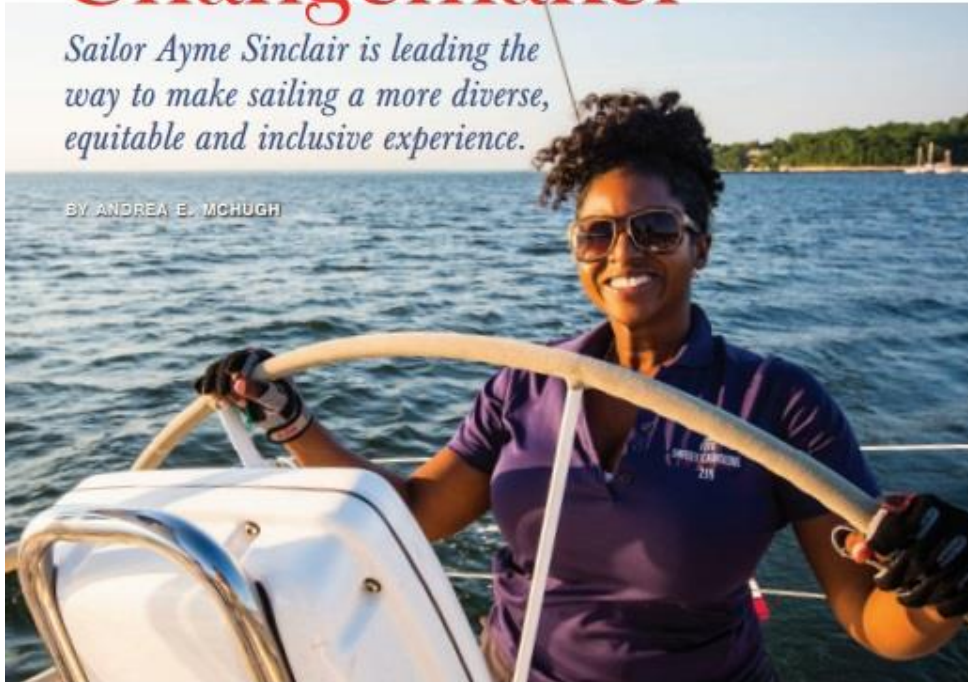


# Changemaker

*Sailor Ayme Sinclair is leading the way to make sailing a more diverse, equitable and inclusive experience.*

BY ANDREA E. MCHUGH



**F**or as long as she can remember, Ayme Sinclair has been drawn to the water. Family vacations at the seashore, playing water sports, hopping on a boat at any opportunity – it all felt as natural as it did exhilarating. Growing up in Westbury, Long Island and later working in nearby Syosset, her world was always close to the coastline. It wasn't until about six years ago, when a friend asked if she'd like to join her for a sail that Sinclair enjoyed her first hands-on sailing experience. "I had always wanted to do that," she says. Instantly, she was hooked.

Soon after, she headed to Chicago to complete ASA 101, an American Sailing Association certification course that teaches fundamentals of sailing, terminology, seamanship,

water safety and how to skipper a sloop-rigged keelboat. "I came back to New York and I thought, 'What am I going to do now? I know nobody that does this,'" she realized. Serendipity stepped in and a co-worker heard of Sinclair's new found passion. He invited her to join him on one of his weekly Wednesday night races. "That's the night I met the team and I went head first into the racing world." Though her J/109 team, *Sweet Caroline*, is made up of men and women of different ages and ethnicities from around the world, she quickly noticed something: her team was an anomaly. As she looked around, she saw very few people that looked like her.

"There's still not a lot of people who look like me," says Sinclair.

IMAGE: Ayme Sinclair takes the helm of *Sweet Caroline*, a 35-foot J/109. Sinclair created @aillweelcaroline on Instagram where the sailing team has nearly 60,000 followers. She has 133,000 personally @aymesinclair. PHOTO: CHRIS ECKHART PHOTOGRAPHY

In 2020, when the nation faced a racial reckoning after the murder of George Floyd by a white Minneapolis police officer, conversations about race and justice permeated many facets of American life – in the workplace, in schools, in church, in social circles and in sports. The widespread call for social justice set off an awakening, and though many sports boast interracial and diverse rosters, the realities of racism throughout sports are ever-present. Sailing, a historically white sport, carries with it a perception of upper-class exclusivity. From competitive to recreational sailing, there's a diversity and inclusion problem. Solving it won't be easy.

"This diversity work is hard. You have to have conversations with people that are uncomfortable," explains Sinclair. "Many people feel like they understand this idea of diversity and creating welcoming spaces, and then don't understand some of their own unconscious bias, and then when you unveil that, it's difficult." Sinclair says that for some sailors, the sport is an escape from everything happening back on land, including social justice movements. "Not everybody wants this to be part of their sailing conversation," she explains. "They don't want to have these hard conversations in their escape."

Sinclair reiterated these issues as a panelist at Sail Newport's *Increasing Diversity in Sailing* event in February 2021. Other sailors on the panel included Canadian Sarah Douglas, the 2019 Pan American gold medalist who started sailing at the

age of seven on the island of Barbados and will be competing in the 2021 Olympics Games in Tokyo; and Mark Clarke, a multi-generational Black sailor who has represented Bermuda internationally in the sport. The three shared their paths to sailing and how looking forward, individuals and organizations can create more opportunities for persons of color to engage in the sport, recreationally and professionally.

In August 2020, Portsmouth-based US Sailing, the national governing body for the sport, released a statement acknowledging inequality within the sailing community and the "need to take positive action to address the barriers and disparities that exist." The organization, which established a Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion Committee in 2018, sent the electronic newsletter to their 45,000 members announcing initiatives created "to continue to expand our community

and ensure we are an organization and sport that reflects the diverse face of America." These include a series of panel discussions that provide a platform for learning, revising their strategic plan to prioritize diversity within the organization and the sport, resources for sailing organizations to create an inclusion plan, a diversity audit that will take a critical look at US Sailing's outward-facing marketing and education materials, and reviewing recruiting and hiring practices to expand their reach and "attract a broader mix of talent that better represents our diverse country."

Other organizations, including the American Sailing Association and the New England Intercollegiate Sailing Association, for example, have also made institutional commitments toward fostering a diverse and inclusive sailing community with actions ranging from resources to inclusive recruiting and walk-on procedures.



Sweet Caroline proudly boasts a diverse crew with sailors of different races, ethnicities, ages, genders and sexual orientations, with many hailing from countries around the world. PHOTO: CHRIS SCARFF PHOTOGRAPHY

Locally, opportunities to teach the next generation of sailors start from a young age. In 2017, Sail Newport partnered with Newport Public Schools to create Pell School Sailing, a program for all fourth graders at Pell Elementary School to learn to sail. According to statewide policy organization Rhode Island Kids Count, 62% of students in the Newport Public School District identify as a race other than white, and nearly one in four Newport children are living in families in poverty.

"To live in Newport means you live within a half mile of the one of the most historically relevant harbors in the world. Every child should have the

opportunity to take the helm of a small boat and experience our harbor," says Brad Read, Sail Newport's Executive Director. Around 160 students participate in Pell School Sailing annually, says program director, Kim Hapgood, and by her estimate, around 1 in 15 have never been on a boat. Not only does the program introduce sailing, but it ties in STEM curriculum, including science, technology, math, and sustainability.

"Sailing also reinforces so many life skills: teamwork, self-reliance, situational awareness, perseverance and above all, respect for the environment," explains Read. "The kids have a blast and are learning in a completely

different way. To have one of our instructors reinforce a lesson plan on geology by pointing out some of the features of our harbor that are carved out due to the receding glacier or by wind and water runoff is an exciting way to reinforce what the students learn in class. We are proud to offer that new point of view to every student in the Newport Public Schools."

Representative Marvin L. Abney, Chairman of the Rhode Island House Finance Committee (D-Dist. 73, Newport, Middletown) is a longtime supporter of Sail Newport and its youth programming. His granddaughters, now ages ten and eight, participated in the organization's summer sailing programs.

Abney says sailing is just part of the lessons they've learned, citing teamwork, resilience, self-confidence, and that after you fall down, you get right back up. "But for that sailing program, many of those kids would never ever be on the ocean," says Abney. The native Texan knows a lot about what opportunity and accessibility means. "I came from the absolute segregated Deep South. There was no question about where your 'place' in life was," recalls Abney.

He credits his mother and other teachers in his life with showing what's possible beyond his small town limits. "There was no swimming pool that I could go to to learn how to swim because all the swimming pools in Texarkana, Texas did not allow colored people at the time to swim, so I had to go out of town to learn that, but there were people who put their arms around me and said Marv, you got a little talent here. Let's teach you about the world." He went on to become a lifeguard and water safety instructor, spending his



Newport's Pell School Sailing program at Sail Newport affords fourth graders an opportunity to expand their learning environment from a classroom to a sailboat in Newport Harbor. PHOTOS: ROSSO FERNANDEZ/ SAIL NEWPORT



summers in New England and going on to enjoy an impressive career in the U.S. Army before serving as a state legislator since 2012.

Last summer, he went down to the docks to watch his youngest granddaughter wrap up the day's sailing session. As the children hopped out of their boats, they worked together to bring each boat to shore. "She said, 'Grandpa, those things are so heavy, but with so many people helping me lift the boat, it was light!' That's what you learn from that."

Today, Ayme Sinclair serves as vice-president of the National Women's Sailing Association and CEO of Women Who Sail in addition to running her digital agency specializing in social media, Sinclair Social. Her mission, she says, is to ease the pathway and create opportunities for *everybody* to get out on the water. She continually finds opportunities to make sailing more inclusive. When she was in Lamu, Kenya, and against all odds, she assembled the first all-female team to compete in a sailing race. "After we did that, women started thinking about joining in these activities," she explains. The experience was metaphoric, and applicable to all organizations and individuals who seek to become changemakers. "You can't just go in with money and ideas. If people aren't ready to make that jump, they're going to keep going back to their old ways. They're not going to adapt. So what we did is we gave them *confidence*, which is the key to change."

Diversity, Sinclair emphasizes, is about fostering the opportunity for all to experience sailing. "Even if you're just dreaming of sailing," she says. "There's the disability piece of this, the LGBTQ piece of this, the economic piece of this, so it's about helping to diversify from all different angles, and I think we're on the right track." ♦



Experience the magic when  
wind and water meet -  
Newport's newest attraction!

OPENING  
MAY 2022!



365 Thames Street  
Newport, RI  
thesailingmuseum.org

THE NEWPORT  
HARBOR HOTEL AND MARINA



EXPERIENCE THE *difference*

Our marina is located in the heart of this beautiful, harbor side town, with plenty of amenities and attractions to satisfy everyone afloat, including waterfront dining at our restaurant, **Saltwater**.

- Dockage includes:**
- WiFi & cable
  - Water access
  - Heated saltwater pool
  - Sun deck overlooking the harbor
  - Showers & changing rooms
  - Business center
  - Kite & laundry available for additional cost

49 America's Cup Avenue, Newport, RI  
401-848-3310 | dockmaster@newporthotel.com  
NewportHotel.com



GORDON KING  
REALTOR

Luxury Homes & Condominiums  
Serving Coastal New England

*Own today, creating wealth and  
security for tomorrow*

Gordon@HoganRI.com  
www.GordonKingRI.com  
401.924.1774



HOGAN ASSOCIATES  
129 Bellevue Avenue  
Newport RI 02840



★ NEWPORT HARBOR GUIDE ★

AN INSIDER'S GUIDE FOR MARINERS TO  
NEWPORT, RHODE ISLAND AND NARRAGANSETT BAY

USA & INTERNATIONAL EDITION

