

Leave a Clean Wake with the SSCA 'Operation Bahamas' Project

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"Leave a Clean Wake" - Operation Bahamas helps the School children from Black Point School, Exuma Bahamas. Photo courtesy SSCA

Leave a Clean Wake

For the past four years, I have volunteered at the [Seven Seas Cruising Association](#) booth during the [U.S. Sailboat Show](#) in Annapolis. My job was simply to talk to people about the benefits of joining the SSCA and help the club meet a membership goal. Clint and I joined the organization several years ago to access the many resources SSCA has to help turn our "Still Dreaming" membership status to "Under Way," so we felt well qualified for the task. However,

over the past two years I've been asked to do another sort of job, namely to recruit boats to carry small boxes of school supplies and text books to the Bahamas.

Since we are not "Under Way" – meaning we don't yet have our own boat – I knew very little about SSCA's Clean Wake Projects. During this 60th year of the SSCA, I set out to learn more about the 'Operations Bahamas' project and why so many boats were needed. What I discovered, surprisingly, was that the program is in a state of transition.

In 1952, the founding members of the SSCA had three goals for the organization: to share information; camaraderie; and to leave a clean wake. Sixty years later, these goals are still the cornerstone of the organization.

To leave a clean wake simply means to show respect for others and the environment so that those that follow in your wake have the same experience. SSCA has both humanitarian and environmental programs for cruisers seeking volunteer opportunities along their journey. While some cruisers are monitoring radiation levels in the Pacific Ocean after the 2011 earthquake and tsunami in Japan, others are volunteering at an animal clinic in Manzanillo, Mexico, that provides free spay/neuter clinics for dogs and cats (still an unusual concept in Mexico). A program closer to our neck of the woods is the Operations Bahamas Project, which provides much needed supplies and textbooks to schools throughout the Bahamas.

In 2003 Bruce and Marilyn Conklin met fellow SSCA members Edie and Larry Smith who were nearing the end of their cruising journey. During the Smiths' extensive travels they discovered that the Bahamian school children were being taught from 15-year-old textbooks in such disrepair that complete sections of content were missing. Edie, a retired schoolteacher – and Florida's 'Teacher of the Year' in 1985 – created 'Operations Bahamas' and began delivering donated textbooks and school supplies to schools in Georgetown, Great Exuma. The Smith's desperately wanted the program to continue. Bruce and Marilyn saw this opportunity as a way to give back to the community that had been so giving to them over the years.

As founder of Florida's West Coast rendezvous in Punta Gorda, Bruce took this idea before his committee seeking their input and support. They unanimously voted 'yes' and asked participants to bring composition books, lined paper, crayons, pens, pencils, colored markers, erasers, scissors, folders, construction paper, book bags, etc. In just their first year, three boats delivered 45 boxes of school supplies to schools in the out islands of the Bahamas.

The program grew in 2006 when the Charlotte County Public Schools in Port Charlotte, Florida joined Operations Bahamas as a partner by providing retired textbooks, workbooks and instruction manuals. During the 2007/08 campaign, six boats delivered 70 boxes to schools in Staniel Cay, Black Point, Little Farmers, Georgetown and Ragged Islands. The following year, 18 boats had delivered 230 boxes and by last year the campaign exploded. In the 2010/11 winter season, 35 boats delivered 350 boxes, requiring 80 volunteers and 45 dinghies.

Longtime volunteer Ron Knaggs began by delivering supplies himself while cruising the islands. After he stopped cruising he became a much-needed central hub on the east coast of Florida. A member of the Experimental Aircraft Association out of the St. Lucie County International Airport in Fort Pierce, Ron

donates hangar space to store the boxes that come to him already packed and pre-labeled with the cruiser's name and ETA. As cruisers make their way south and east, they contact Ron to make arrangements for a rendezvous. Once contacted, Ron loads up his truck and meets the cruisers at their marinas. Though the busiest between November and December, Ron delivers packages all winter, from October to March.

Ron spoke fondly about the cruisers he sees every year saying that he looks forward to their stories and pictures from the previous years. "The most treasured experiences for the cruisers are when they can deliver the supplies directly to the school," Ron explained. "It is rare for some of these areas to see cruisers, so the schools often welcome them with songs."

During the 2011/12 campaign Ron and other volunteers loaded 748 boxes onto 59 boats, distributing supplies to 11 schools in the Out Islands of the Bahamas, including Ragged Island and the Acklins. It took well over 100 volunteers, making the 2011/12 campaign the largest in Operations Bahamas history. While overjoyed with the success, Bruce and Marilyn realized that the program was not sustainable in its current form. To reach more schools they needed to provide more textbooks and school supplies, requiring even greater numbers of boats and volunteers. They could easily see the need for 120 boats for the 2012/13 campaign. Downsizing was not an option, so they began searching for alternatives.

Their research led Bruce and Marilyn to the Khan Academy, a highly acclaimed, free Internet-based learning content provider. In the summer of 2011, Bruce and Marilyn flew to California to meet Sal Khan, the founder and CEO, who was named to Time magazine's 2012 list of the 100 most influential people in the world. The Khan Academy has over 3,200 free education videos available, including a substantial K-12 math program. The company's belief that "... a few great people can make a big difference" fits perfectly with SSCA's Clean Wake program. A partnership was established and plans began for the 2012 campaign.

Upon their return, Bruce and Marilyn conducted a pilot program with five schools in the Bahamas using the Khan Program. After downloading the comprehensive math lesson onto thumb drives, they loaded the programs onto the school's computers and provided them with five headsets for the children. Bruce explained that it is easier for the children to concentrate using the headset. Immediately the children became so engaged in the program that they wanted the schools to open after dinner so that they could come back to do more modules.

As Bruce talked about the pilot program and the future plans for Operations Bahamas, I couldn't help but notice the excitement in his voice. "We are now part of the digital age and well positioned to help contribute to improving education in the United States as well as expand our outreach education in the Bahamas, Caribbean, Central America and beyond," he explained.

The first order of business was to change the name from 'Operations Bahamas' to 'Education Anytime'. This name better describes its widening role in education. Next the website educationanytime.org was created as the tool to download the Khan Academy math and science program. Bruce explained that the full K-12 math program would only be available on this site. Step-by-step instruction will guide the volunteers through the transfer of the programs onto USB drives. The volunteers will then have the ability to load the programs directly onto schools' computers without the need for high-speed Internet access.

Even before the website is fully up and running, one boater was so excited he shared with Bruce his plans to distribute the program. "He was going to load the program directly on to his laptop and when he met with principals of schools he would work through one of the modules together." Once the principal agreed to move forward with the program, the boater would have the flash drives available to immediately load the programs on their computers so that they can begin teaching that same day.

For those who want a more hands-on experience with the schools, the Khan Academy has a coaching element that will also be available on the Education Anytime website. The tools will help volunteers train the principals, teachers and others so that they can better serve the children in the schools.

"Cruisers anywhere in the world can now dig into the very rich math component of Khan Academy and take them to places that never had a math program," continued Bruce. "Our current retired professional volunteers in Punta Gorda continue to be mostly members of the Seven Seas Cruising Association who have had the vision to support and scale this worldwide educational effort." Instead of reaching 1,000 Bahamian children in 2012, there is a potential to reach several thousand worldwide with just this single initiative.

The second initiative will take place in schools right in Florida. Beginning in September, professional volunteers (directors of education, retired school Principals, etc.) will implement and coach teachers in the Khan Academy content in at least four schools in the Charlotte County School District. The program will then expand to more than a dozen Florida schools in 2013. From there Bruce sees the program going national.

Although the scope of the program has dramatically changed, I will still be recruiting volunteers to take school supplies to the Bahamas. In October, the Punta Gorda SSSA gathering of members (GAM, in the parlance) will still collect the much-needed supplies. Instead of recruiting 60 boats I will only need to find 15. The rest of my time can be spent talking about all the other wonderful benefits SSSA has to offer their members. Happy 60th Birthday SSSA.

Whether she's gunkholing with her husband Clint aboard their Contour trimaran, Tri Dreaming or jumping the mast on a race boat, Terry loves life on the water. Recently she began sharing this passion through her writing and photography. Contact Terry at terry.boram@gmail.com.