

Norwalk Citizen News

Embarking on an Adventure With a Purpose

by Jeanne Goodman

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With their maiden voyage in Kayak for a Cause, longtime friends and event co-founders Miles Spencer and Scott Carlin did not realize the community's enthusiasm for kayaking, people's desire for an adventure with a purpose or the corporate interest in backing something of this magnitude.

Tomorrow morning, 330 people are registered to launch kayaks from Calf Pasture Beach and paddle 12.4 miles across Long Island Sound to Crab Meadow in Huntington, N.Y., for the Nautica/GQ ITAL Kayak for a Cause VII. Each paddler has raised a minimum of \$500 for five local charities: The Courage to Speak Foundation, The Hole in the Wall Gang, Outward Bound Connecticut, Save the Sound and CancerCare ITAL CARE of Connecticut.

This year marks the largest turnout yet. "So many people want to celebrate this achievement," Spencer said in an interview last week. Spencer and Carlin had to limit the number of participants to around "300 and change" primarily because of concerns about safety on the water. "We have to cap it somewhere," Spencer said.

In addition, 286 volunteers will be behind the scenes to help out with the day's events, beginning at 7 a.m. with the launch and concluding with an after party at Veterans Memorial Park from 5 to 10 p.m., which the public is invited to attend for a \$25 donation. The Neville Brothers will perform with special guest Ryan Shaw.

No matter how popular Kayak for a Cause becomes, Spencer and Carlin promised themselves early on that "as long as the soul and spirit" of the event remained, they would continue to let it grow and has it ever. On a whim, the pair first paddled across the Sound from Rowayton in 2001. They founded Carpe Paddlum, the nonprofit organization that started the event, got friends involved and began raising money for their favorite local charities as part of their excursion. In 2005, Nautica and GQ ITAL signed on as presenting sponsors. This year's event also is presented by Land Rover. The support and media presence from those organizations alone have catapulted Kayak for a Cause into a new league.

"It continues to be fun," said Spencer, who works with a talented group of people to put everything together each year. "Scott and I focus on the long-term vision

and the message," and the Kayak for a Cause board and sponsors execute the "growth curve," he said.

The event at its core is well done, and its message of blending the love of kayaking with the support of local charity work remains intact, Spencer continued. "KFAC today is probably representative of what it will be in the future."

With 330 registered paddlers, the event is about as big as it can get at its current venue, Spencer said. While it continues to be enormously successful, it is quickly outgrowing the area. Spencer said he and Carlin are looking into other cities in the United States that could support its growing popularity. Only the after party still has room to grow at its current location. In the early years, the celebration consisted of nine buddies "getting thrown out of a bar in Long Island," Spencer joked a far cry from this year's expected horde of 4,000 to 5,000 revelers at Veterans Memorial Park. The after party used to take place at Calf Pasture, but the celebration outgrew the beach area.

The mounting interest, however, bodes well for raising funds. Last year's event garnered \$486,000 for organizations selected by the Charity Committee. This year the committee sifted through applications from 60 charities. The five chosen, Spencer said, "really matched our objectives," which include preserving and protecting the environment, serving the community and promoting leadership. Paddlers have the option to raise funds for one of the selected charities or have the money divided among all five.

This marks the third year Norwalk resident Kileen Doyle will paddle for **The Courage to Speak Foundation**, whose mission is "saving lives by empowering youth to be drug free and encouraging parents to communicate effectively with their children about the dangers of drugs," according to its Web site. Norwalk resident Ginger Katz founded the organization with the support of her husband, Larry, after their son, Ian, died of a drug overdose in 1996. Since then, Ginger Katz has shared her family's story with tens of thousands of students and parents nationwide every year. Doyle, who serves on foundation's board of directors, works as an administrative assistant for Mercer Human Resource Consulting in Norwalk.

Doyle first got involved in the fund-raiser because of her love for kayaking and sports in general. When **The Courage to Speak Foundation** was chosen as a recipient, she couldn't turn down the opportunity. It is, after all, a cause close to her heart. "Ginger Katz is a very, very good friend of mine for many years," Doyle said. "My son and her son grew up when they were little and attended different sport activities together, martial arts in particular. So I knew Ian for a long time, and it was devastating to hear this happened to a child and also to a good friend and a friend of my son's. When I heard that they were going to be recipients three years ago, then I definitely knew that I wanted to be part of it, and when I

found out the other organizations that were going to be assisted by the efforts of all the people who are paddling, I just thought it was a great."

Kayak for a Cause is a great name for the event, Doyle said. "That's exactly what it means. Everyone there is very committed to doing what they can to help support these organizations." She already has reached her fund-raising goal of \$1,000 for this year, but she continues to seek out donations.

Doyle has continued with the event each year that **The Courage to Speak Foundation** has been a beneficiary. Plus, that invigorating sense of accomplishment keeps her going back for more. "It's so exciting, and it's such a great experience. When you land on the other side, when you pull up to shore, it's like, 'Wow I did it,'" Doyle said. "I think it just shows determination, too. The people who supported me by sponsoring me and donating to the various charities, I just thought it was wonderful of them also to be willing to make that support."

Doyle was hooked with her first crossing. "The way I feel is once you have a taste of that, you want to keep going. You can hardly wait to sign up for the next year. You look to see if you can meet or exceed the goals that you had the previous year, to see what you can do to go out and promote Kayak for a Cause and all the wonderful things that they do for the local charities." Doyle particularly likes the event's focus on charities within Connecticut "that have done good things for the people here."

To gear up for the challenge, the grandmother of two goes biking regularly, does weight training at her gym and kayaks several times for four to six hours straight. Doyle enjoys the exercise, the entertainment afterward and getting the word out about The Courage to Speak Foundation. Plus, the event attracts a friendly crowd of paddlers who share a common bond. "I just think it's phenomenal what Miles has accomplished. Gathering national sponsors, gathering almost an army of volunteers requires a tremendous amount of work," Doyle said. "Their dedication to doing this and making this a fun event for all the paddlers and for the local area it's a wonderful opportunity."

This year Doyle helped to form a **Courage to Speak team**. The team, or pod, has 11 members, including fellow board members Peter Corbett and Jim Sibley. "Everyone there is connected in some way to Courage to Speak," Doyle said.

Spencer said several teams have signed on this year, including corporate teams, charity teams and "very wacky" individual teams, like his Pine Hill Pirate team. Pods will paddle in honor of CancerCare of Connecticut, a nonprofit organization based in Norwalk that offers free professional support services to those affected by the disease, and The Hole in the Wall Gang Camp, which provides children with serious illnesses and conditions with camping experiences and offers year-round support to their families and health care providers.

For Katz, just knowing that people keep her family's story in mind as they embark on their challenge across the Sound means a great deal. "We really appreciate the funding that's raised to help us expand our programming," she said in an interview last week.

Her organization currently has drug-prevention curriculum programs for elementary, middle and high school levels. The money raised through this year's Kayak for a Cause will help launch a program for parents called **Courage Parenting 101**. "After I speak I always feel like parents want more," Katz said. The new program is designed to help adults understand addiction, she said. Among the topics to be discussed in the four-session program are drug trends in the United States, emotional management principles for prevention, detection, intervention and support. Katz is in the process of figuring out how to disseminate the program, but it's currently underfunded, she said.

"Parenting courses should be offered," Katz said. They would help adults "understand what our children are being exposed to."

Sibley is The **Courage to Speak** pod leader this year. He decided to participate after hearing about the event from his fellow board members a few years ago. "It's because of their excitement about this that I got involved," he said.

The Huntington resident will be kayaking for the second year in a row. In past years, Sibley was a volunteer and sponsored some paddlers. Sibley, who previously lived in Norwalk for 25 years, works in Westport as an investment operations manager. He met Katz 12 years ago and has volunteered with her organization for several years and been a board member for the past two.

The Courage to Speak Foundation is a cause in which Sibley thoroughly believes. "Anytime a youth is confronted with decision making that affects their lives, I think it's important for adults to help," he said. "If The Courage to Speak Foundation can help, and I believe it does help them make the correct decision when it comes to the use of drugs, then we're saving lives."

As the pod leader, Sibley must make sure all the other paddlers have the appropriate equipment and keep everyone together. He also has communication with the chase boats. "Kayak for a Cause is not a race across the Sound. The idea is for everyone to make the passage safely," he said.

Like Doyle, Sibley already has reached his fund-raising goal of \$1,000 but hopes to continue his efforts. Aside from keeping his pod safe, his other main goal is "just to have fun, which is what this day is all about."

Sibley is proud of the fact that he's 64 years old and leading the charge. "I'm one of the older guys out there on the water. I really get enthused." And his

enthusiasm is contagious. Sibley recruited two people from his office to participate in this year's event as well.

Like his teammate and Katz, Sibley is quick to point out that four other worthy charities also will benefit from this event. "That does make it even better," he said, as it brings consciousness that these charities are helping the community.

Among those paddling for all five causes this year will be 27-year-old Patrick Sikes of Norwalk, who is embarking on his fourth crossing. Although he works in the financial industry, he earned his degree in marine biology and Save the Sound is particularly important to him. The nonprofit organization is dedicated to the restoration and protection of Long Island Sound and its watershed through advocacy, education and research.

"Part of the reason why I have the marine bio background is because I grew up in Norwalk being on the Sound in many different ways," Sikes said. "My father owned a house on a salt marsh, and I was always into marine organisms and that type of stuff. I grew up fishing with family members, and then I took on kayaking. When I started studying in school, I was actually a guide on eastern Long Island."

Kayaking was a perfect exercise for him because it incorporated his love of marine life. "I realized you can get closer to things in a kayak than you can in anything else. You can get in shallower water, you can get closer to birds and crabs and stuff on the ground while you're in a kayak."

As a competitive rower and lifelong ocean lover, Sikes has found that protecting Long Island Sound has become more of a priority in recent years. "Save the Sound is just something that as I grow up and become more of a local resident than just a kid around here, it's one of the aspects of living here you'd like to keep it as an attraction in return."

Sikes has raised \$1,400 for the five charities thus far. His goal is \$4,000. He, too, will be paddling as a pod leader alongside a good friend who participates with him every year. "It's a day we look forward to every summer. It's just the one big event that we look forward to, as far as charities go," Sikes said. "As kayakers, it's one of the natural areas in which we participate."

For more information or to make a donation, visit www.kayakforacause.com



Kileen Doyle Kayaker for Kayak for a Cause and Courage to Speak board member