



Hope Floats

It started in Denmark, with a blacksmith and a terrifying diagnosis. Dr. Mikkel Anthonisen specializes in multiple sclerosis at the Copenhagen University Hospital, and it was his job to inform his patient that he had MS.

For anyone, the news would've been devastating; for the blacksmith, it also sounded like the death of a long-standing dream. For 15 years, he'd been building a replica of Joshua Slocum's *Spray*, which he intended to sail around the world upon his retirement. "Now that will be impossible," he said.

But Anthonisen wasn't just a physician; he was also a committed and experienced sailor. "No, you have to go," he told the man. "Sailing is brilliant for anyone with MS." And in that moment, Anthonisen was inspired by a dream of his own: to begin a foundation, which would ultimately be called Sailing Sclerosis, to give those stricken by the disease the opportunity to experience the sport, and the freedom and challenge it provides.

What began as a modest local effort on small sailboats in Copenhagen soon spread like wildfire. Just two years later, Sailing Sclerosis had

found a sponsor (the biotechnology company Biogen Idec), purchased an oceangoing thoroughbred (a 67-foot steel cutter now called *Oceans of Hope*), and set forth on an ambitious circumnavigation, with a rotating crew of MS patients signing on for individual legs of the voyage.

Late last summer, having already completed a trans-Atlantic voyage with a team composed of sailors with MS and Sailing Sclerosis project members, the bright orange *Oceans of Hope* bobbed in her slip in Rhode Island's Newport Shipyard. The yacht was undergoing some routine maintenance in advance of a trip down the Atlantic seaboard, through the Panama Canal and then onward across the Pacific in 2015.

Josh Hall, the accomplished British solo sailor, joined Sailing Sclerosis to help prepare the boat for the rigors of crossing oceans. "In a nutshell," he said, "the objective is to work

with people who are living with MS, to reinspire and reinvigorate them to do things they didn't do before. It's about freedom, which is what drives all of us who go sailing, and also empowerment."

Some 2 million people worldwide have multiple sclerosis — a disease of the central nervous system — but it has been said that no two people experience MS in the same way. Some patients can withstand the demands of a transoceanic adventure.

"Our transatlantic crew was very strong," said skipper Kristian Bo Echwald Hansen. He met Anthonisen at the Royal Danish Yacht Club, where they were both members, before joining the team full time.

But Sailing Sclerosis is not only about those who can cross an ocean. At every port-of-call, local MS patients — even those who use wheelchairs — also come aboard for day sails and the chance to

MS patients are welcome to do voyaging stints aboard the 67-foot steel cutter Oceans of Hope.

experience the joy of big-boat sailing under full sail.

"*Oceans of Hope* is an ideal platform for every level of mobility," said Hall. "It's a big, heavy, safe boat with a deep cockpit. For those who arrive on the pontoon in a wheelchair, we get them out of the chair and aboard the boat, give them a chance to steer, and even go up on the foredeck if they want to. What we really want them all to be are ambassadors afterward, to inspire others in local MS chapters and associations to take on new challenges. Some days, it might be hard for some MS patients even to get to the mailbox. Hopefully, they'll be able to battle to get there, because they had to battle with the challenges they faced on the water."

Going forward, Sailing Sclerosis welcomes MS patients to visit its website (www.sailingsclerosis.com) to apply for crewing positions on *Oceans of Hope*. Along with bringing further awareness of the disease — much remains unknown about MS, which affects almost twice as many women as men — Sailing Sclerosis also wants to support research and discover better treatments and ways to manage the disease.

It's also about connecting with individuals, in a personal and meaningful way. "Nobody is mollycoddled," said Hall. "Once they come aboard, they're driven. If they say they're tired they're told to carry on as far as they can. Of course, they know help is there if they require it. But it's more a matter of we'll help you when you need it, not necessarily when you ask for it."

Herb McCormick is CW's senior editor.