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**On the Annie D.**



by Wendy Costa

I wake up to the boat rocking and pots and pans clanking. My watch says it's 4:30 a.m. Watermen are getting out on the Chester River early today. I turn over in my sleeping bag on the hard floor of the pilothouse (a gel mat provides a little cushion for my 58-year-old bones). My 24-year old first mate, Nathan, is a foot away, asleep with earplugs in his ears to keep out my annoying snoring.

After a short dream, it is light and I remember that I am not at home, but on the *Annie D.*, a Chesapeake Bay buyboat owned by the Echo Hill Outdoor School. I hear children's voices. They have slept on deck and are surprised to find that they are wet from the night's heavy dew. Their conversation is lively and wide-ranging, from the fish they caught yesterday to the oysters, mussels and assorted fish in the onboard aquarium to what's for breakfast.

I open my eyes and look up to the roof of the pilothouse, where orange life jackets are neatly stowed. Three skeletons of birds' heads look down on me. Savage Barbie also looks down on me, which I always find reassuring. A few years ago, a child on an Explore trip found this Barbie doll on a beach. It had no clothes its hair needed considerable attention. Ever since, kids, captains and mates have been dressing the Barbie and combing her hair. Today she looks quite stunning, dressed in electrical tape that makes the perfect little black dress. On other trips she has been dressed in eel skin, seaweed, shells and string.

Suddenly, inevitably, a 12-year-old boy is right by my ear, telling me that the "lovable loo" needs to be emptied into the large "pee pot." The lovable loo is a plastic bucket with a seat and a lid, and the pee pot is a huge plastic container with Chinese characters on it. When it gets full, we stop at a marina and pump out. Reluctantly, I crawl out of my sleeping bag and take care of this chore--the only unpleasant chore on the *Annie D.*

Nathan is up and has put the coffee pot on. The two kids assigned to breakfast duty are bringing up fruit, milk and pancake mix from coolers in the cabin. Then they set up the dishwashing stations: a bucket of river water with detergent, followed by a bucket of fresh water from one of our large containers, followed by a final rinse in a bucket of fresh water with sanitizer in it. In a few minutes, Nathan is calling us for breakfast.

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The other kids are draping their wet sleeping bags over the boom and the lifelines of the *Annie D.*, a 50-foot wooden Chesapeake Bay buyboat that was built in 1957 to buy oysters from the sailing skipjacks. Since the mid-1980s, Echo Hill Outdoor School has owned the *Annie D.* and uses it to take groups of six children, usually aged from ten to fifteen, on five-day exploration trips on the Chester River. More than 2,000 children have explored the Chester River in the *Annie D.*, or on Echo Hill's skipjack, the *Elsworth*.

This is my third summer and my tenth trip on the *Annie D.*, and my eighth as captain. I have always been a sailor and I never thought that I could fall in love with a stinkpot, yet my affection for the *Annie D.* runs deep. This heavy, squat boat with its loud, powerful diesel engine works its magic on almost everyone who travels the Chester River on her. Children who don't know each other and who have little in common seem to be very kind to each other on the *Annie D.* I remember one hot July afternoon when six kids, ranging from a mentally challenged ten-year-old to an aspiring teen model, spent all afternoon jumping off the bow, trying to catch a bar of Ivory soap with a Frisbee. I have rarely seen such pure joy on the faces of young people. The next summer, most of those children returned.

Children willingly take the helm of the *Annie D.*, carefully piloting her between the red nuns and the green cans that mark the river's channel. They delight in the place names along the Chester: Devil's Reach and Frying Pan Point, Quaker Neck, Spaniard Neck and Comegys Bight. They watch the osprey and herons and bald eagles through a pair of World War Two-era binoculars. Children who will not clean their own rooms at home, and who are picky eaters, swab the deck and wolf down huge quantities of fresh, healthy food (the deck is a perfect spot for eating just-caught crabs and perch).

Like a dependable horse, the *Annie D.* seems to know all the good fishing and crabbing spots on the Chester, as well as the best places to play in the mud. With its three-foot draft, the *Annie D.* can anchor near the shore. We often leave the *Annie D.* to go ashore in an equally solid 20-foot bateau called the *Ric* (named for a character in Gilbert Byron's *The Lord's Oysters*--a memoir of growing up in Chestertown, Md., a century ago). Legendary Kent County waterman and boat builder, Stanley Vansant built the *Ric* in the 1970s. The builder of some 5,000 boats, Vansant was the model for Sculptor Ken Herlihy's bronze Waterman's Statue in Rock Hall, Md. Kids operate the outboard motor on the *Ric* and are surprised to see how different it is from the *Annie D.*'s wheel.

Sometimes we visit some of the extraordinary people who live along the shores of the Chester. On one trip we visited a man who had restored a beautiful 18th century house. On another trip we visited a farmer who could remember when submerged aquatic vegetation grew 100 feet out into the river (now there is only mud). On this trip we watched as veteran waterman Dickie Manning and his son pulled up their pound nets and sorted and separated what appeared to be a huge quantity of fish. It has become an Echo Hill tradition to visit metal artist Jonathan King, who greets us with a whistle from his homemade calliope and goes on to show us how he makes bronze crabs. Also on this trip, Rock Hall musician Tom McHugh pulled up alongside the *Elsworth* and the *Annie D.* and enchanted us with banjo and harmonica music that celebrated the Bay.

On these trips of exploration, there is no timetable, no set curriculum, no tests and no electronic gadgets. More than anything else, the purpose of these Echo Hill Outdoor School trips is to engage children's sense of wonder. It is, I think, our most important sense--and perhaps the most endangered.

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