

The Metro Section

The New York Times

THE NEW YORK TIMES METRO FRIDAY, SEPTEMBER 13, 2002

PUBLIC LIVES

A Sailor With a Dream Awaits a Gathering of Boats

By LYNDA RICHARDSON

MICHAEL FORTENBAUGH stands on the promenade overlooking New York Harbor, his arm gesturing widely as he envisions the scene tomorrow. He's an optimistic sort, and rain or shine, he sees hundreds of sailboats parading slowly, majestically, each with a personalized flag in memory of the dead from Sept. 11.

Mr. Fortenbaugh is the 39-year-old commodore of the Manhattan Yacht Club. He came up with Sail for America, a gathering of boats, large and small, to remember, to heal and to provide inspiration for New Yorkers after a fraught anniversary.

"The city will never put what happened behind it," he says. "But the city will incorporate Sept. 11 into the future. It's going to be a better city. We're creating a vision of hope and beauty that we hope will lead us into the future."

Mr. Fortenbaugh is an energetic and earnest man in a blue polo shirt, khakis and Top-Siders. He bounds over to greet a visitor on a bright morning in the large bobbing pontoon that serves as the yacht club's floating office, on a marina in North Cove Yacht Harbor in Battery Park City.

The more he talks about his grand undertaking, the more animated he gets. He began organizing Sail for America in the weeks shortly after the World Trade Center attacks. That day, he raced his family from the neighborhood, where they live in the Gateway Plaza apartments, to New Jersey in a powerboat.

Mr. Fortenbaugh marked Sept. 11 this year with his family in their New Jersey farmhouse. They invited friends over. But he didn't leave his computer all day. He was busy answering e-mail messages from people eager to pay \$12 to sponsor the memorial flags. They include the widow of a firefighter, relatives and friends of victims, and members of sailing clubs. He predicted that as many as 1,000 boats would participate.

"I feel what we are doing will help a lot of people, and it helps me too," he says, nodding his head. "I saw too much that day, and if there's any way I can help, that's my goal."

Tomorrow, boats will converge in three grand parades on the harbor, and in memorial races. The event culminates Sunday with the start of Around Alone, the single-handed round-



Steve Hart for The New York Times

"It was just the right moment in time. I saw a beautiful body of water and thought, 'Why isn't anyone sailing in New York Harbor?' This used to be the sailing capital of the world."

MICHAEL FORTENBAUGH

the-world race that was set to begin from Newport, R.I., but diverted here to show solidarity with the city.

Mr. Fortenbaugh, who was raised in Highland Park, N.J., has been a sailor since he was a boy. He spent summers on the Jersey Shore and grew up around yacht clubs. He founded the Manhattan Yacht Club in 1987, two years after graduating from Princeton, where he studied 20th-century American history. He briefly traded from three Wall Street acquaintances.

He says people thought he was kooky with his notion of reintroducing recreational sailing to the harbor after it had been largely absent there for more than 60 years. He got financial backing from three Wall Street acquaintances.

"It was just the right moment in time," he says. "I saw a beautiful body of water and thought, 'Why isn't anyone sailing in New York Harbor?' This used to be the sailing capital of the world."

He goes to great, and amusing, lengths to convince you that he is not your run-of-the-mill commodore. Leaning over, he emphasizes that he

is not really a "yachtie." Yes, he cleans up nice in a black double-breasted blazer with three gleaming gold stars, white slacks and white bucks on his feet, like the outfit he'll wear for the start of Sunday's big sailing race.

But he considers himself a liberal, thinks Bill Clinton was a great president and scratches his head over talk of war with Iraq. His wife, Sharon Phair, is the associate publisher of Paper, the avant-garde monthly magazine, and co-chairwoman of the Parent-Teacher Association at Public School 89, which their two sons attend.

"I love New York and the diversity of the city," says Mr. Fortenbaugh, the son of a classics professor at Rutgers University and a mother who stayed home with three children. "I enjoy being around people based on who they are and how they perform, as opposed to where they come from. That's what New York is about."

Yet Sept. 11 has changed him; it has, he says, made him a better citizen. "There's a need to bring people together," he says. And he's looking with a fresh eye at his yacht club, which he insists has never been a snooty place. The club, which costs \$990 a year to join, lists 440 members and runs a sailing school with 20 boats.

"Anybody can join our club; anybody who enjoys sailing," he says. "We view them on whether or not they're friendly. Most places don't."

Even so, he says he wants to change the organization's name to the Manhattan Sailing Club by the end of the year.

IN recent months, Mr. Fortenbaugh has led neighbors in a public battle with New York Waterway over what he contends are its efforts to expand its ferry service into the idyllic little harbor where the club is based. New York Waterway, which has seen its business increase sharply since last Sept. 11, disputes this assertion.

Mr. Fortenbaugh, though, views the ferries as a lingering threat. He also says he feels stung by criticism that the yacht club is an exclusive, profit-making private club using public land.

"We are a yacht club, he says, "but I was, in effect, battling the stigma. They were using the built-in prejudices against a yacht club against us. So now, I recognize in public opinion, yacht clubs are dinosaurs."