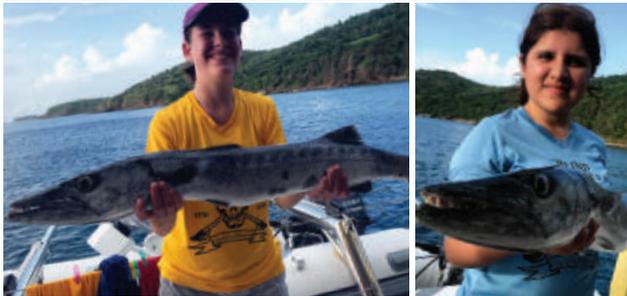


## Blind Teen Sailors Find Wider Horizons

BY TIM EIGO



A sailboat on the open water is the last place David Nigro ever expected to find himself. “To this day I never learned to swim,” admits the intellectual property lawyer at Snell & Wilmer. Though he does his best work grounded in chemistry and information technology, last November he found himself bobbing in the waters off Puerto Rico. As beautiful as the scenery was, Nigro kept his focus on those in his care—a dozen teenagers who are blind and visually impaired.

Happily, Nigro adds, he was part of a team of adults paired with youngsters in a project spearheaded by Arizona’s Foundation for Blind Children (seeitourway.org). The mission: offer the youth adventures that might otherwise be inaccessible to them because of their disability.

The ambitious journey—covering six nights

and 110 miles through the Caribbean Sea from the Spanish Virgin Islands to Puerto Rico—was another of the FBC’s “challenge events” that changes lives. The first trip, in 2009, was to climb Mount Kilimanjaro. Other destinations on the biennial experience included a guided swim from Alcatraz to San Francisco.

Nigro credits FBC CEO Marc Ashton with the vision to advance this mission.

“Marc first commits to the impossible and then figures out how to do it.”

This most recent event was another level of challenge altogether. After raising money for this endeavor, Ashton sent teachers, staff and volunteers to San Diego so they could learn how to sail. There, they tied and reconfigured knots—blindfolded—so they could help teach the young sailors—who had no sailing experience.

The guides and teenagers then spent months learning how to handle boats. Beginning in August 2018, the dozen kids and their paired allies plied the waters of Lake Pleasant. They were led by experienced trainers from sailing school Tiller and Kites—who also had never led unsighted people in such an effort.

Nigro admits he thought, “This trip is either going to be great, or go horribly wrong!”

As they enjoyed the Caribbean, the teenagers handled all elements of the boats: raising and lowering sails, steering, tacking and jibing, cooking, cleaning and swabbing decks.

As remarkable as the sailing experience was, Nigro says, the larger experience was even more valuable for the group dubbed The Blind Buccaneers.

“The whole trip was an ‘orientation and mobility’ final exam. These kids were navigating airports, ground transportation, an eight-foot-wide marina, and a 45-foot boat—and getting around. They all passed with flying colors.”

“To be able to learn that skill in a few months and complete that challenge gives them a sense of accomplishment and a sense that they can live independently, that they can do all the activities of daily life that everyone else does.”

Nigro serves on the boards of the FBC and the Arizona State Schools for the Deaf and the Blind. In August, he was named the *Phoenix Business Journal’s* Health Care Heroes Philanthropic Champion winner.

The full story of the Caribbean adventure will be told in an upcoming documentary, “Ocean of Obstacles: The Voyage of the Blind Buccaneers” (o3film.com). Watch the trailer here: <https://bit.ly/2OkBTwU>

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