



Jim Hoehn/Special to The Freeman

University Lake School senior Sophie Bennett works on the kayak with All Hands Boatworks volunteers Tom Haydon, left, and Paul Bargren.

ULS senior navigates kayak project

Completed wooden boat launched on Lake Michigan

By Jim Hoehn
Special to The Freeman

HARTLAND — Despite her understandable excitement, Sophie Bennett had one thought as she launched her newly completed kayak into Lake Michigan.

"The question I had in my mind was, 'Am I going to sink? Am I really going to sink? I can't sink. It's not going to happen,'" said Bennett, a senior at University Lake School. "When I got in the water and I pushed off, 'Oh my gosh, I'm not sinking!' Those were my first words on the kayak."

The successful launch was the culmination of Bennett's senior project, for which she took over a partially completed wooden kayak and finished it with the help of All Hands Boatworks, a Milwaukee-based non-profit organization that often works with youth groups through hands-on, wooden boat building.

Bennett considered several other projects before eventually settling on finishing the kayak.

"My original thought was to build a bike," said Bennett, who lives in Nashotah. "And I was able to contact someone from Trek, she was an engineer, and I realized that the amount of time needed to put in was too much. Then, I thought of kayaking across Lake Michigan, which my parents did not enjoy at all."

Finding the right boat

Her on-campus advisor at ULS, John Fritzke, was working on another project with All Hands Boatworks, whose founder, Bill Nimke, mentioned that they had an unfinished Arctic Tern kayak that had been donated to the organization.

The kayak was started by a man who died and it eventually was given by his wife to All Hands Boatworks.

"I'd say it was probably 65 percent completed when we received it," said Tom Haydon, a boat building instructor at All Hands Boatworks who served as Bennett's off-campus advisor. "We were able to shake it out and find out just where it was left off. The gentleman who built the boat up to that point just did a really fine job. He really did."

Under the guidelines of her senior

project, Bennett worked at All Hands Boatworks from 9:30 a.m. to 2:30 p.m. Monday through Friday for three weeks.

Although Bennett, 18, has kayaked frequently with her family, she had no previous boat-building experience.

"I had no idea how to build a kayak or where to even start," Bennett said. "So, when I went to All Hands Boatworks, they were always there to help me and support me. If I had questions, they were always there to answer them for me in a very simple, basic way so that sooner or later I would understand it and I could catch on."

Haydon, who recently retired after 30 years in construction management, said Bennett caught on quickly and was extremely conscientious in her approach.

"One thing I loved about working with Sophie was her inquisitiveness, her friendly demeanor, and her work ethic was incredible," Haydon said. "She would take a task from beginning to end, she would clean up without a lot of instruction."

"One of the joys with her that I just absolutely loved is she relished just sitting on buckets with us and eating her lunch," Haydon said. "It was like the highlight of our day. It was just wonderful. She was just like one of the guys."

Putting the pieces together

Paul Bargren, a retired attorney who volunteers at All Hands Boatworks, has built two boats and has owned a sailboat since the mid-1970s. He also worked with Bennett on the kayak and was at the launching, along with Haydon.

"That was a lot of fun. She was pretty excited," Bargren said. "We all were. We all took a spin. She was by far the best paddler in that boat."

All Hands Boatworks was started in 2013 by Nimke, whose background was teaching, although not shop class. He was familiar with other youth boat-building organizations around the country and saw the possibilities provided by Milwaukee's myriad of waterways.

"We've built over 70 boats and worked with more than 1,800 kids throughout the Milwaukee area in



Photo courtesy of Sophie Bennett

The wooden kayak finished by Sophie Bennett floated on Lake Michigan when it was launched, making her fear that it would sink unattended.

five years," Nimke said.

One of the techniques Bennett learned was called stitch-and-glue, where holes are drilled to allow wires to be fed through and then tightened, pulling together the pieces, which are then glued with epoxy.

Some parts of the project were less enjoyable than others, Bennett said.

"I did not like sanding," said Bennett, who plans on studying mechanical or civil engineering at Marquette University. "I don't know why anyone would. But when I was on Lake Michigan with my kayak it was all worth it in the end."

Haydon also acknowledged the drudgery of sanding, sanding and more sanding, but said Bennett handled it well.

"The sanding's the inevitable part," Haydon said. "That's just the part you suck up. You've just got to do it. But, with the sanding comes rewards afterward. It's not a part you can skip. She rode it out all the way through. Boat building's very sequential. It doesn't skip sections. And, she had the endurance to roll through all of it. There are no shortcuts."

Rather than just show pictures of the project, Bennett brought the kayak to school at the end of May for the senior project presentation. She does not get to keep the kayak, which belongs to All Hands Boatworks, which probably will auction off the boat.

"She engaged herself in this build," Haydon said. "And, she could not wait to paddle. She was excited about paddling. She just lit up when she pushed away from the dock."

And, she didn't sink.