



Gold Star Sailing: More than a Program by Cody Hauser, Gold Star Sailor

Growing up, my childhood was anything but typical. The loss of my father set me apart from my peers, often leaving me feeling isolated and different. While other boys learned skills from their fathers and heard their voices cheering from the sidelines, I navigated life without that presence. For years, I felt as though I was climbing an uphill battle, struggling to find a sense of belonging. Recognizing this, my mother sought out a program that could help me reconnect with the confident, passionate boy I once was. That search led me to Gold Star Sailing—a program that ultimately changed my life.

When I first attended camp in 2019, I was a shy 13-year-old who kept to himself, often leaning on my older sister for support. However, after just a few days of sailing, bonding with other campers, and sharing my experiences without fear of judgment or pity, I realized the power of this program. Before attending, I had been embarrassed by my status as a Gold Star kid, feeling as though I had lost something fundamental that others still had. But sailing provided me with a second family, a community that embraced me for who I was and helped me take pride in my identity.

Over the next five years, I returned to Gold Star Sailing as often as I could. Each summer, I reunited with my second family, learned from some of the best sailing coaches in the world, and, for a brief time, felt the weight of my loss lift. The program offered experiences beyond just sailing; I had the opportunity to train with Olympians, rappel down a military tower, tour the Everglades, explore the rich history of Rhode Island, and more. These experiences were transformative, shaping me into the person I am today.

Though my years as a camper eventually came to an end, my journey with Gold Star Sailing did not. Patrick, the head of the organization, gave me the opportunity to return as a counselor in Fort Lauderdale. Stepping into this role allowed me to see my younger self reflected in the campers I worked with. I witnessed firsthand the same struggles, doubts, and eventual triumphs that I had experienced years before. Being able to mentor these campers, helping them gain confidence and find their place within this community, was one of the most rewarding experiences of my life.

Gold Star Sailing is more than just a camp; it is a lifeline for Gold Star families. This program does not simply provide a week of activities, it builds a lasting support system, a network of friendships, and a profound sense of belonging. None of this would be possible without the dedication of people like Patrick and the generous supporters who ensure that the camp continues to thrive. For me, and for the more than 200 Gold Star kids who have passed through this program, it is a place of healing, connection, and transformation. It has shown me that sailing is more than a sport—it is a journey that shapes lives, including my own.

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