



FLAGSHIP NIAGARA LEAGUE

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To Whom It May Concern, Tall Ships America;

I am writing to nominate the U.S. Brig *Niagara* as Tall Ships America's Sail Training Program of the Year. To my knowledge, there are less than a handful of large wooden sail training ships actively engaged in sail training underway. It is regrettable that there are so very few ships like *Niagara* active in this country, but even were there many more, *Niagara* would still be a hotter crucible than most.

Niagara, as Captain Walter Rybka succinctly calls it, is an "inside out ship." She has a large, complex rig, which requires at least three dozen crew to operate effectively, but below decks she is a tightly packed warren, slim on unnecessary conveniences. Unlike most sail training ships, *Niagara* needs her trainees to operate efficiently, and the trainees literally live side-by-side the professional crew. A sailing ship is a tool for welding people together; *Niagara* is, by virtue of being a spectacularly inconvenient ship, able to produce that process to spectacular effect. She is unparalleled in her ability to produce both the heat of human contact and the pressure of an almost unmediated encounter with the elements. *Niagara* does not take passengers, she makes mariners.

In 2015, *Niagara* filled 104 trainee berths. These included people from many different walks of life, with the vast majority being high school and college students, typically living aboard as crew for two to three weeks. *Niagara's* five structured programs included: a college history voyage, focusing on comparative public history at the maritime museums of Lake Erie; a college level Environmental Science Field School; a high school program focused on developing leadership; a voyage dedicated to fostering industry-relevant seamanship skills in high-school maritime academy cadets; and a partnership with the prestigious Williams-Mystic program. Throughout all of these disparate programs, though, has run a unifying theme of building community through the practice of seamanship under sail.

While the captains and crew of *Niagara* are proud of the impact which they have had on all of these lives, the transformation is often most profound at the high school level. Many of these students come from less than easy circumstances.

Below is one of the more eloquent, but by no means the only, testimonials to *Niagara's* Sail Training program:

Dear Walter,

For five years now I have been taking the young high school rowers of Station Maine to spend a week on Niagara. I suppose by now I should be used to seeing the change that comes over these kids, but it never gets old.

Surrounding this vessel you have something very unique and very precious. There is an entire community of people, young and old, who are loving life and unafraid to show it. They are committed to the highest level of work ethic, to the honor of their vessel, and to each other. They are committed to education. In this community young hopefuls are made welcome. They are taught simply by infectious example that mutual respect is life as usual and that hard work is a joyous norm of the day to day. My young rowers are made welcome into this community, and it is my personal pleasure to watch them blossom.

I need to tell you about one young lad in particular. He is young for his age and comes from a family where anger is simply the way one communicates. He had never had a non-violent male role model 'til he came here. I have had the privilege of watching him from day to day come out of his shell and let down the walls. Slowly over the course of the week he has learned to make eye contact, to speak out so he is heard, to hold doors, to say please and thank-you, and to help his shipmates without being asked. He has learned to smile. All of this in a single week simply through being in the company of your vessel and crew. Although we must take him back to a less than functional home life, he has learned this week that there is a bigger world beyond his former horizons towards which he can aspire.

We can rarely know the back-stories of the young crews we nurture. We can never know what difference we are actually making in this world. I can only promise you that, at least for the crews of Station Maine, the Flagship Niagara and her crew are changing lives. Thank you so much for what you have given us.

Sincerely,

*Muriel Curtis
Director, Station Maine*

Niagara is a singularly complex machine. It represents one of the last and most refined expressions of a technology millennia in its evolution. Yet beneath this complexity lies a willful simplicity. A sailing ship is a fugue of simple ideas and simple machines, repeated in subtle and complex variation. And as magnificent as it is, the ship is simply a tool. The purpose of a ship is the practice of seamanship, the craft and the science of making a home and a living in a hostile element. While it is no longer necessary for us to take to the sea in wooden sailing ships for the practice of war or trade or exploration, it remains necessary for us to, from time to time, take the measure of ourselves against the wilderness. And when we have arrived, we find the individuals who set out at the beginning have become family.

Sincerely,



Joseph T. Lengieza
Director of Marine Operations
U.S. Brig *Niagara*