

Sailing into the sunset

Sailors and landlubbers alike understand and have the similar image of sailing off into the sunset. The warm glow of a vibrantly colorful sky, the peacefulness with the feeling of pure tranquility.

If this is the feeling we are all after what does it take to get to that point? A sailor often ponders this question when stuck in some contortionist position in the bilge for weeks on end; while maintaining and fixing that vehicle that is needed for a glimpse of a picture perfect moment. Sunsets are symbolic of the work, effort, toil and anguish it takes to get to those amazing memorable moments. Amazing moments that can not be repeated.



For three months, our family lived in a boat yard while we repaired our boat and prepared for our next passage across the Pacific. You look at all those sunset pictures reminding yourself what the pay off is. If there is an opposite to sailing into the sunset it would be fiberglass repair. In the depths of working on the boat and the daily feeling of “when will this end”, amazing things can still happen. You just have to be ready.

In early November the trawler Pelagic pulled into our boat yard from Ushuaia, Argentina. Upon arrival

they announced that the boat was for sale, two hours later as news spread a buyer showed up and a deal reached. The amazing story was just beginning. We meet many people in our travels, but our time with Ken and Eef would change us and help prepare us for our up coming passages.

Eef Willems has spent her entire life sailing and may be one of the most accomplished sailing captains in the southern hemisphere. For ten years aboard her sailing vessel Tooluka she would take passengers across the Drake Passage to Antarctica, South Georgia Island and the Falklands. To hear her talk about navigating the canals of the tip of South America sounds like sailing in San Francisco Bay, “Oh, you could do it, you just need to be prepared”. Kind of like Tiger Woods saying golf is only “a consistent swing”. As the years ticked by in this place she never found anyone to share Tooluka with. “Most guys can not handle me being the captain or taking orders from a woman”.

Four years earlier Ken arrived in Ushuaia with his then wife who he had spent the last 17 years with working their way to the end of South America where they found a great

community of people and home. He arrived here by a different path. While sailing solo in the Sea of Cortez he rode ashore to ask a woman camping by herself: "What are you doing here?"

"Waiting for someone to sail away with me".

Helen, was physically handicapped and was unable to sail, but the ocean had called her, when mother ocean calls it's hard to say no. The sailboat was traded for a trawler. The following 17 years Ken and Helen sailed throughout North and South America. While in Ushuaia Helen would succumb to her handicap and fell into a coma. The doctors were able to awaken her long enough to lucidly say good by. Her last words to Ken were: "Thank you for the best years of my life".

Ken thought his story ended here, but the healing process would lead him to Eef. Two sailors falling in love creates the inherent problem of having two boats, but the bigger problem is that we are all mortal. Eight months into their courtship Ken came home with the news that he had terminal cancer. The enormity of such news can have many outcomes from anger to fear, but for Ken all he felt was love and that night he asked Eef to marry him.

There is not a guy out there who hasn't tried to woo a woman with a sad story and Ken had a really good one. Not the case though, Eef explains that she has spent most her life giving life changing experiences to others all the while the people would leave and with them memories and emotions that make life full. "When Tooluka is full of people it is the warmest boat, but when it's not it's so cold". "Now it's not cold anymore".

The sailing life is so rich, in part, because of the connections you are able to make. Like those perfect sunsets they don't come along often, but when they do the realization that we are not just becoming better sailors, but better people. This is why we left the docks, our 'chance meeting with Ken and Eef was changing our world and it was now better, with the paradox that things for these two were getting worse.

When we met Ken and Eef we were preparing for our next passage, ironically it was also what Ken and Eef were planning. Theirs was different than ours, they were selling their boat to become a one boat family. Their plan was to sail from Ushuaia to Newfoundland, Canada. Their preparation included a body bag and all the paperwork for a death at sea. Ken says in a warm way: "This one will be a little different for both of us". Eef is quick to say it's kind of like carrying an umbrella, if we bring it maybe we won't need it.

A year ago Ken stopped his cancer treatments in hopes of having more quality of life with his wife. "If I were to have started chemo treatment I would not be able to go sailing any more". Ken has beat the expectation of the doctors so far, but make no mistake, Ken is sick and you can see the pain in his eyes. He explains the nerve pain that is caused by his cancer is difficult to manage or plan on. One day he will walk 6 km and the next he can barely raise his head. "I have lots of plans for the future, but I see where I'm at for the day".

Clarity is an amazing gift, but comes at a high price. It allows for a very meaningful time, the kind you don't get very often. The type of experience that stays with you long after it happened, so why don't we do this more often? The cost. Ken says: "I am so lucky and I am having the best life I could ever imagine".

Eef's resume speaks for itself, but it is how centered she is as a person that is most amazing. Sailing will end for all those who venture onto the sea, making the importance of being a good human being more important than being a great sailor. The presence of Ken and Eef leaves you with the feeling of hope, love and courage that stays with you long after they leave. Within their story we realized what we needed for our passage was a great sense of purpose, connection and perspective of what our time on Earth is all about. We don't know how to package it, but it will go with us as we discover ourselves and our place here on Earth.

When it was time for us to go we had to gather up our two little girls and their things. Eef handed us our foul weather gear and said "See you brought your gear and it didn't rain". Ken added "Where do you go from here?" "Two more years, we hope". For the first time Ken looked concerned and said "You need more time than that!"

I love sailing it really is a rich life. While we were listening on a cloudy day in Patagonia we saw the most amazing sunset. The kind you don't forget.