

IN DEPP'S FOOTSTEPS

Grosse Pointe Farms Teen To Sail Aboard "Pirates Of The Caribbean" Tall Ship

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If 13-year-old Grosse Pointe Farms resident Welling French is forced to write the dreaded "What I did this summer" essay upon his return to school this Fall, at least he'll have plenty of interesting subject matter.

Welling is spending eight weeks of his summer camping in Vermont – but it's the next item on his busy engagement calendar that is likely to capture his classmates' attention. He and five of his closest friends will sail aboard the *SS Providence*, a 110-foot "Tall Ship" recently featured in the Johnny Depp film "Pirates of the Caribbean – Dead Man's Chest" when it departs from its home port of Providence, Rhode Island on August 21.

The four-day trip was initially offered as an item in a charity auction to benefit the Grosse Pointe Academy, and was presented to Welling as a 13th birthday present. An original plan to sail throughout the Great Lakes had to be abandoned when storm damage resulted in the closure of locks on the New York canal system, preventing the *Providence* from travelling to Port Huron, its intended point of departure.

"Tall Ship" is a loosely-applied term used to describe a traditionally-rigged sailing vessel. The *Providence* is a faithful 1976 replica of a revolutionary war craft initially piloted by legendary admiral John Paul Jones, which sank or captured some 40 British vessels during the course of the war. The original *Providence* began as a merchant vessel owned by one John Brown, whose family founded Brown University. At the outbreak of the war, Brown sold the *Providence* to the Continental Congress, making it one of the first five ships in the United States Navy.

Welling's mother, Hadley French, says her son is eagerly looking forward to sailing on the *Providence*. "He's so excited. Wide-eyed excited. He was jumping up and down," Hadley says. "He is absolutely a history fanatic – loves it."

Hadley French shares her son's excitement, and is enthusiastic about the educational opportunities the trip will afford him. While on board, Welling and his friends – fellow Grosse Pointers Christopher Stroh, Eric Huebner, Grace Rentschler, Jackson Krieger, and Mack Day – will take an active role in the ship's operations while

learning about shipboard life. “I sailed when I was much younger. My husband, who is now deceased, sailed. Welling has not had this experience,” French says. “Rules and regulations, standing orders, going aloft - they teach the kids all sorts of different navigational things. They even take turns on watch. I hope he gains some sailing experience, and knowledge about the history of the tall ships.”

In the latest “Pirates” movie, the unfortunate *Providence* is devoured by a sea monster. In its less-eventful offscreen existence, the *Providence* serves as a “floating classroom,” conducting an ongoing series of educational programs for teens, primarily in its home port of Providence, Rhode Island. According to Kathleen McQuillan-Hofmann, spokesperson for ship administrators the Providence Maritime Heritage Foundation, the ship teaches the sorts of lessons Hadley French is interested in. “Kids learn to do things hands on, take responsibility, work together, and follow instructions - things that they will use in their lives,” McQuillan-Hofmann says. “The likelihood that the kids we work with will become deckhands or captains is pretty remote, but having experiences where they push themselves a bit and having those kinds of life skills are things you can always look back on with pride, and can help you in another difficult situation in life, knowing that you can accomplish wonderful things.

“It’s a great equalizer. It doesn’t matter how much money you have or what your background is when you’ve got to raise sails together. It provides a chance for people to come together and learn.”

As yet, the *Providence* is slated to embark without set ports of call, although destinations such as Newport, Mystic Seaport, and Long Island are likely contenders. Aboard the *Providence*, it’s the onboard rather than the offboard experience that counts the most. “It’s mostly about being out sailing, getting some training, and learning about navigation,” McQuillan-Hofmann says. “Our primary emphasis will be on sailing, not the destination.” During the four-day excursion, Welling and his friends will work alongside the ship’s standing crew, manning the tiller, “going aloft,” and learning to use both traditional and contemporary navigation methods.

Hadley French is hopeful that her son’s shipboard experiences will provide memories for a lifetime. “Welling is focused on the experience of being on one of these ships. He thinks it’s awesome,” she says. “I think that the most wonderful thing is the

opportunity to do something like this with friends. You build great friendships doing things like this, and I'm sure they all will.”