



A TRIBUTE TO TOM

(Note: The following is excerpted from a eulogy given by Paul Bargren, one of All Hands Boatworks' volunteers, at the memorial service on May 10, 2019)

My name is Paul Bargren. I'm here today speaking about Tom on behalf of an organization called All Hands Boatworks, where I am one of the volunteer boat builders and instructors. It's a group where Tom spent a lot of time helping over the past three years. But I have to say, first, that I'm also here speaking as a friend of Tom. I know many of you considered Tom a good friend, and I think he had that knack for making anyone he met feel like a good friend. I only knew Tom a little over a year, when we met at the Boatworks' shop, but we hit it off immediately. We shared a lot of things. We liked to hold a tool in our hands, and we liked to plane wood. We liked to build small boats, and we liked to sail them. We both wanted to work with kids. We also found that we worked well together building boats. "We do good work," Tom would say. And who else could I share a video with about a guy applying epoxy to plywood?

All Hands Boat Works is a nonprofit group founded six years ago. AHB works with Milwaukee's urban disadvantaged youth. High school and middle school boys and girls work with adults like Tom on wooden boats. The goal is to build in them hope, character, self-confidence, resilience, and craftsmanship through wooden boat building.

AHB's director, Bill Nimke, remembers the first time Tom wandered into the shop three years ago. Tom walked into the winter shop space and introduced himself. "Hi, I'm Tom," he said. "I googled boatbuilding in Milwaukee and your organization came up. I've done a little bit of boatbuilding. Maybe there is a way I can help. I don't want to interfere with anything you're already doing, and I'm good at following directions." He said he didn't know if he could teach or work with kids, but he was willing to give it a try.



"What happened over the next three years," according to Bill, "was nothing short of magical and transformative - not only for all of us who got to know Tom, for the many kids he inspired through our boatbuilding projects, but also for Tom himself. He discovered that more than building boats, he found much joy in helping to build kids. He would often say, 'Now this is what I signed up for!'"

Many of the things we admire in Tom are in some ways things that he worked on to develop in himself. He told me he used to have anger issues. But he worked on that, and we know him now as someone calm and measured. When he came to All Hands Boatworks, he wasn't sure if he could be a good teacher, but he worked on acceptance and patience with the students, and now we know him as an accepting and patient instructor by example. We see Tom as a role model, and if we

want to follow his example, we can work to improve in ourselves the qualities that we so much liked and respected about him. That would be the ultimate tribute to Tom.

At All Hands Boatworks - and certainly in his career at BSI and in his life in general life - one of his gifts was his eye for design. He could look at an empty building and see a shop space. He could look at a drab riverfront property and see a green space with an inviting park shelter, and sketch it out in a couple of minutes on a white board. He could look at a stack of plywood and see the graceful curves of a boat.

And more importantly, he could look at a young man or a young woman and see their potential. He could see an apprentice and a future carpenter or painter or engineer. And, patiently, he would try to draw out that potential within them. Sometimes he was frustrated that things could not move faster. Sometimes, however, he was rewarded when the teen made strides in the program, showing initiative and new skills that hadn't been obvious.



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Tom had sayings for all occasions, many of them quotes from his family. "Nothing to it but to do it," he would say. Or his riddle for any complicated project: "How do you eat an elephant? One bite at a time." He liked to quote his dad: "Your attitude determines your altitude." That last saying is still on the shop wall, put there by one of the students last year in Tom's honor.

Tom had pretty simple tastes. For him, the height of luxury was eating a peanut-butter-and-jelly sandwich in a sailboat cockpit. Eating that sandwich anywhere else was almost as good, too. I didn't know for a long time whether he had long hair or short hair, because he always had a cap on. I think he admitted to owning a tie once, but I'm not sure he ever admitted to wearing it.

Was Tom a perfectionist? Well, in a way, yes. He always wanted our wooden parts to fit just so, and the epoxy to be thickened just so, and the screws to be tightened just so. And he always tried to see the best in people - for the kids in the program, for those who helped out, for all of those in his life.

He was also an optimist. But I think he saw a difference between things and people. Wood splits sometimes, and sometimes the epoxy drips. He understood that things - objects - can't always be perfect. He knew that a boat won't sink if there is a little flaw here and there. He even named the boat from last summer's Builder's Camp "Good Enough." And for that matter, I think he saw his cancer as one of those physical things that just couldn't be changed.

But he never gave up expecting the best from people - or from himself. And in expecting it, so often he brought it forward. His goals for the kids and for himself never got compromised. And that was the sense of purpose he imparted to his students and his friends. I think that's why he lived out his life as he did.

Tom and I had a chance to talk for what turned out to be the final time shortly before his passing. We had been working together in his basement on a fiddlehead canoe he was building. We had a good time working together. He knew his time was short. I know he was sad to be leaving. But he said he'd had a full life. He'd seen the best in people. He knew he was loved. He said he was not afraid. He said that he was at peace with his life, his faith, his salvation.

And these are the things we loved about Tom. ■

