

# Sail On

## Come sail away with Captain Joan Gilmore

By Laura French

Captain Joan Gilmore didn't take up sailing until she was in her 30s. But after leaving her desk job to take the helm, it's been smooth sailing.

Today, her Sail Away Sailing School offers Basic Keelboat & Cruising courses on Lake Minnetonka and White Bear Lake, as well as basic and bareboat chartering courses on Lake Superior and winter courses in the Virgin Islands.

She got her start volunteering to crew for friends who would charter boats in Superior and Bayfield. Once bitten by the sailing bug, she got skipper certified to charter. Then she decided to try for her Coast Guard captain's license.

"I thought it would be just a part-time thing, but it took over my life," she says.

Her first full-time sailing job was as live-aboard captain of a 42-foot sailing ketch owned by Camp St. Croix. Asked about the scariest experience in her sailing career, she remembers the time she and the teen-aged sailors were on the Black River when a bear climbed onto the boat ahead of theirs and ate the leftover breakfast cereal off the picnic table. Captain Joan loaded the flare gun, prepared to fire it at the bear. Fortunately, a blast of the air horn was enough to scare the bear away.

Interestingly, she says that this experience was far more frightening than the times when 10-foot waves on Lake Superior were washing over the top of the boat, or seeing six water spouts along the horizon. Really?

"If you're in a boat you trust, you're okay," she says calmly.

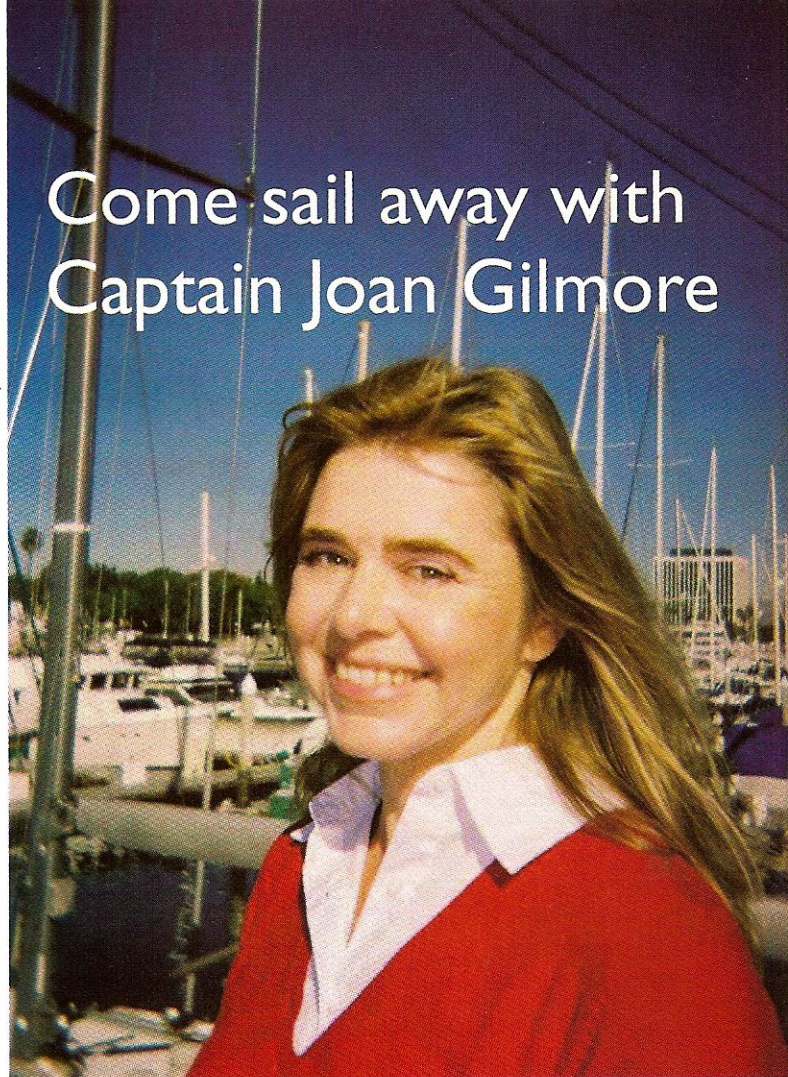
### 'Like a little kid'

Dramatic moments aside, Gilmore's favorite part of her job is "the teaching part," she says. "I love seeing students feeling comfortable, getting excited, taking the helm and controlling the boat. Every adult looks like a little kid."

These days, most of her students are "middle-aged couples, people with desk jobs." They're people Gilmore can relate to. She had previously worked for a Japanese marketing group, providing high-tech and automotive information. "Then the Internet took over," she says, and it was time for a career change.

"In middle age, you want to develop the other side of your personality," she says. For her, that meant switching from the intellectual to the physical. "Because I learned sailing in my 30s, I can remember what it feels like not to know. That helps me in my teaching now."

Captain Joan thinks that sailing should be part of every lake-dweller's experience. For those whose vehicles of choice are motor craft, she challenges, "How close can you get to a loon? If you're in a sailboat, you can get up really close. You can hear a duck paddling in the water,



hear the whoosh of its wings as it takes off." Night sailing is another magical experience, she says. "It's so quiet, and you see the moon on the water, and it seems to follow you."

### Getting started

Getting started can be as simple as a basic 12-hour keelboat course. Her students have a 98 percent passing rate after four three-hour sessions, she says. With three students per boat, and all instructors with at least 10 years of experience, students get lots of hands-on experience. For information, go to [www.sailawaysailingschool.com](http://www.sailawaysailingschool.com).

The Upper Minnetonka Yacht Club ([www.umyc.org](http://www.umyc.org)) has several kinds of boats for rent, and Captain Joan advises renting a few varieties before buying. "There's racing, cruising, you can get a bare boat charter license to charter boats in the Caribbean."

Sailing is even accessible to folks who can't afford to buy and maintain a boat. The Northern Lights Sailing Club ([www.nlsc.org](http://www.nlsc.org)) offers trips throughout the summer on Lake Pepin and Lake Superior. A day of sailing costs just \$25 to \$40 per person, Captain Joan says.

The best thing about a sailing trip, she notes, is that once you have all your food and all your friends on board, you can get away from the world. "It's a Utopia." ■■

*Laura French is a Roseville-based freelance writer. She wrote about the historic homes of Lake Minnetonka in the last issue of Dockside.*