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Lawrence University

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Rescued: A Student's Curiosity Helps Bring Long-Lost Rowing Shell "Home"

Posted on: June 14th, 2013 by Rick Peterson

If "Katie" could talk, she undoubtedly would say "THANK YOU!"

With the help of the dogged efforts of 2013 Lawrence University graduate Will Evans, Katie has been rescued, refurbished and restored to a place of honor, or at least high visibility, after spending more than half of her life in near forgotten oblivion.



Will Evans '13 helped track down a 75-year-old racing shell used by the Milwaukee-Downer rowing team from 1938-64. The boat now hangs in the Mudd Library.

Katie, a 55-foot-long, oak-and-cypress, eight-person racing shell, was “born” in 1938 in Foxboro, Mass., and spent the first 26 years of her life as a member of the rowing team at the all-women’s Milwaukee-Downer College.

But when Milwaukee-Downer consolidated with then-Lawrence College in 1964 and 50 of its students matriculated to Appleton, Katie remained in a Milwaukee boathouse.

Katie and her older “sister” Louise, a six-person shell, eventually wound up being sold to Charles Bouc, one of the founders of the Wisconsin Maritime Museum in Manitowoc. While Louise found her way to the museum, Katie had to settle for the rafters of the Bouc’s family farm barn, where she sat in silent solitude for the past 41 years.

Enter Evans, a rowing enthusiast and four-year member of Lawrence’s club rowing team, whose curiosity launched a two-year odyssey beginning in the fall of 2011 that eventually led him to Katie.

“After joining the rowing team, I wanted to know more about its history,” said Evans of Augusta, Ga. “I found out that Milwaukee-Downer College was one of the first all women’s colleges to have rowing, which at the time was deemed a man’s sport. I thought that was really cool, but I didn’t set out to find any boats.”

At the time of the consolidation, Downer women had asked Lawrence to reinstate the rowing program so that their four shells could be brought here, but it was deemed too expensive.

“The boats were left in the boathouse in the village of Shorewood and eventually, the village did something with them, but I haven’t yet been able to figure out what or where they were between 1964 and 1972,” Evans explained.

Two of the four boats —Katie and Louise — wound up in the possession of Charles Bouc of Manitowoc in 1972.

“For Sale”

“I found out the Louise was in the Maritime Museum, but didn’t know what had become of the Katie,” said Evans. “Then a friend pointed me to a rowing website that had an ad for an ‘old rowing boat’ that said it was from ‘an all women’s college from Milwaukee.’ I thought, ‘That’s got to be Milwaukee-Downer College.’”

Evans arranged a meeting with the seller, who turned out to be Charles Bouc’s son, Mark. Excited about his discovery, Evans approached the Lawrence alumni office to see if something could be done to reacquire Katie. With the help of a fund-raising effort, Lawrence purchased the boat for \$4,000.

“Mark’s father, Charles, had passed away in the fall of 2012 and Mark had decided to sell it,” said Evans. “I was one of the first people to contact him. Another person who talked to him wanted to use the boat as a buffet line. So he was happy to part with it because he knew it was going to a good place.”

Extricating it from the Bouc barn required some logistical gymnastics, including the removal of a large window on one side of the barn and the combination of a tractor and a haymow chain hoist.

“It needed some TLC, it had been neglected for a long time,” said Evans, “but everything was basically still there, all the shoes. The only things missing are the seats and the riggers.”

With the help of Cops Construction, Katie received a mini-makeover: a rough sanding and fresh coat of varnish.

“We wanted it to still have the presence of age to it,” said Evans. “There’s splinters and pieces missing you can see, but that helps tell the story. It is an old boat and it does have a story.”

Current Address — Mudd Library

That story now will be available for all visitors to Lawrence’s Seeley G. Mudd Library, where Katie hangs from the first-floor ceiling, just behind the reference desk and within sight of the elegant Milwaukee-Downer Room. The site was chosen for its high traffic pattern.

“I love rowing and obviously Milwaukee-Downer College loved rowing,” said Evans, who competed in both four- and eight-person events for Lawrence. “I thought, why can’t we show this to potential students? Now, when they walk into the library, they’re going to see this huge boat and say, ‘Please explain that to me, what it is? What’s the history behind it? Why is it there?’”

Seeing the Katie come full circle has left Evans with a special sense of pride and accomplishment.

“I’m really happy we were able to get the Katie back for the Milwaukee-Downer women. Lawrence has a lot of Milwaukee-Downer traditions and rowing is one of the most prominent. Whenever the Milwaukee-Downer women see that boat, they’ll just be ecstatic. I love Lawrence and this is something that can help bring the students and the history of the university together.”

Katie will be officially dedicated during a brief ceremony Saturday, June 15 at 1:15 p.m. as part of Lawrence’s Reunion Weekend celebration.