



Students from Wagner Middle School in Winterport, Maine, with their mini-boat, Pridetanic, which landed in Portugal after seven months on the Atlantic.

# Across the pond without a skipper or crew

By Mary R. Drake

“Charger has landed in Wales! We are soooooo psyched!” wrote Barbara Nidzgorski, a teacher at John Winthrop Middle School in Deep River, Conn. Her email was sent after a 4-1/2-foot fiberglass sailboat her class sponsored was discovered by a beach patrol on Pendine Sands earlier this year.

Charger was one of five mini-sailboats launched off the Bahamas in May 2012 through Educational Passages ([www.educationalpassages.com](http://www.educationalpassages.com)), a Maine nonprofit corporation with a mission to educate young people about the science of the world’s oceans. Propelled solely by the wind, each boat has a diamond-shaped sail that can rotate 360 degrees around the mast. A weighted stern skeg keeps the boat upright and headed downwind.

A GPS transponder on each boat’s deck sends a position twice a day to a satellite, so anyone can follow the routes and positions through the Educational Passages website or [www.nefsc.noaa.gov](http://www.nefsc.noaa.gov) (keyword: drifter). It’s learning, 21st-century style — studying history, oceanography, international relations and much more by launching sailboats into the

Gulf Stream, then following their progress online. Students fiberglassed finders’ instructions to the hulls and enclosed information about themselves in interior watertight canisters.

Educational Passages was launched in 2008 by Laurence Wade, retired captain of Maine Maritime Academy’s training ship, State of Maine; Richard Baldwin, a 67-year-old physical therapist from Belfast, Maine; and David Lathrop, Baldwin’s tech-savvy college roommate. Baldwin, a former long-distance solo sailor, spearheads the program. Students at Mid-coast School of Technology in Rockland, Maine, build the hulls.

“Teachers and students develop unique, hands-on, real-life experiences in map reading, weather patterns, international relations, maritime history, boatbuilding and more,” Baldwin says. “We help with contacts, support, launchings and lesson plans.”

This fall, eight boats will sail an Atlantic Trade Triangle Route Challenge. “We hope to launch several off the Canary Islands, just before the Christmas Caribbean Rally leaves,” Baldwin says. “It’d be cool if the racing fleet photographed our boats under sail.” The other mini-boats will begin off Jamestown, Va. “If they go ashore, we hope finders

will patch them up and relaunch them so they can complete the Atlantic Circle.”

The \$1,500-a-boat charge is discounted for kit boats, which students assemble with epoxy and 3M 5200 adhesive. Satellite time is less than \$20 a month. Baldwin hopes sponsors form collaboratives to reduce costs.

To obtain participants, Baldwin, Wade and others make presentations, field website inquiries and rely on referrals. Wade’s government and global maritime contacts and Baldwin’s enthusiasm attract a growing cadre of volunteers, including boatbuilders, scientists, oceanographers, educators and boaters. Naval architect Mark Fitzgerald, who refined Baldwin’s original hull design, calls Educational Passages the “coolest program for promoting science and technology” and hopes yacht clubs will get involved.

After its initial launch, Charger landed on Myrtle Beach, S.C., and surfers relaunched it. It came ashore in Newfoundland and was repaired, then launched in midocean from an oil supply ship. It sailed almost across the North Atlantic before going silent in November. “My students feared a whale swallowed it,” Nidzgorski says. “We were ecstatic when it landed in Wales [Jan. 9].”

With help from Welsh schoolchildren and officials, Charger was refurbished and driven across Wales to a cargo ship, which relaunched it off the Azores. “We hope Charger will complete the Atlantic Circle,” Nidzgorski says, “but a hurricane sent it north toward Europe again. We’re watching to see where it lands next.”

Nidzgorski’s class made Charger a school-wide adventure. “The kids researched Wales, Skyped with Welsh schoolchildren and were interviewed by local media and the BBC,” she says. “They’ve learned so much, especially from the connections they made each time Charger went ashore.”

Michele Campbell of Winterport, Maine, had a similar experience with her class’s boat, Pridetanic, which spent six months in the Gulf Stream. “My students were so excited when our boat landed in Portugal,” says Campbell. “They loved the pictures that Isaul Augusto [who found the boat] sent of himself wearing our school T-shirt. Getting Pridetanic to a Portuguese school and corresponding with those students is a good problem-solving project for my class. Communications require a translator and are difficult without reliable Internet.”

Educational Passages has launched 24 mini-sailboats, involving schools from Maine to Florida, Boy Scouts and an assisted living facility. Five boats are sailing the Atlantic. Seven others are (hopefully) still sailing,

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but they're no longer reporting. Students try to contact harbormasters, yacht clubs, local schools and media when they see their boat approaching land. One student-sponsored boat sailed 8,743 miles. Several were flung ashore by tropical storms Alberto and Beryl

in 2012 and then relaunched. Some survived Hurricane Rafael last year. This summer, one boat completed a mini-Atlantic loop, and two landed in Nova Scotia. Panamanian tribesmen, French beachcombers, Caribbean fishermen and ships at sea have recovered boats.

"Each mini-boat is a 21st-century message in a bottle from American students to find-

ers in foreign countries," says Wade. "Educational Passages' learning possibilities are infinite for everyone. Even grandparents get involved. Technological developments in mapping and GPS are opening up even more remarkable opportunities for our boats and our participants. If you've got to study, why not have fun?" ■