

# “IF I’M REALLY, REALLY GOOD, CAN WE KEEP THE BOAT?”



by Gary Graham

Four-year-old Meara Kirwin is perched in her corner spot at the table, and willing to be good forever if necessary to save the boat she loves. She is listening to her parents talk about the future, and what to do with *Cool Breeze*, the family boat, after their adventure is over. The family boat is a 1985 Witness 35, a Lock Crowther-design Catamaran. Nice boat.

The family consists of Pat Kirwin, 44; Jeananne, 42; Erin, 12; Ben, 11; Liam, 10; Meara, 4; and Jasper, the big red dog, age 5.

The discussion is taking place at home, which is on the boat. Yes, that’s right, a liveaboard family of 6, and a dog, on a 35-foot Cat. I met them in Varadero, Cuba, a long way from their hometown of Edmonton, Alberta, Canada. This is how they got there.

“We wanted to spend some time with the kids while they still liked us, and this seemed like the best way to do it.” Pat and Jeananne are sharing how this whole adventure started. Pat continues, “A year or two out of our whole life doesn’t make a lot difference in terms of



*Meara Kirwin would be good forever to save the boat she loves. Promise.*

money, but it can make a huge difference to us, to our kids, to the family. So we decided to just do it.”

Sure, you just abandon a career, actually two careers; Pat and Jeananne are both lawyers. You pluck three kids out of school, you lease the house, you buy a boat, you learn how to sail the boat, and you just do it. Sure.

But Jeananne put it all back into perspective. “Well, we decided to do it years before we actually did it. We first had a five-year plan, figuring Liam, who was then a baby, would be old enough to take on a boat in five years. But then

about six months before we were going to buy a boat, I got pregnant with Meara, so that meant we had to reset the whole schedule by another four years at least — which we did. But the point is, we didn’t give up, we just adjusted the schedule.”

Pat added, “There were other things. My partners in the law firm decided to go another direction, so we had to deal with that, and other related issues, too. But the point is, we didn’t give up the dream. People would suggest that our setbacks might be a sign we shouldn’t do this.

And my response to that is, ‘When the going gets tough, the tough don’t say, “this is a sign.”’ We just had a lot of challenges to meet, and we did.”

Jeananne really summed it up. “You know, a family of six doesn’t simply walk away from all the commitments and influences of school and church and jobs and friends and community. You have to wrench yourself away. And it isn’t easy at all. It takes commitment to the goal. It takes schedules and lists, and a real determination. We had to overcome the fear of losing what we had, our so called security, in order to realize



*Meara, left, hits the books, same as her older homeschooled siblings, while Erin rests in her bunk.*



an even more important goal of spending time with our children in their formative-years.”

And as I sat with them in their boat, I guess I got a glimpse of what families are supposed to be. Pat and Jeananne made continual eye contact with each other. One would start a thought, the other would finish it. One would make a point, the other would illustrate it with, “Yeah, like when we had to . . .” And the kids would jump into the discussion, each with their own perspective and contribution. It looked to me like this family had it all neatly together.

Why a catamaran? Pat answered: “Well, from what we read and saw, a catamaran just seemed the best option. It has a lot of room, shallow draft, is stable, fast and safe, and this one has 6’ 3” of headroom in each hull. Being 6’ 2”, that means a lot. But mostly it was the roominess. Erin has her own room, Jeananne and I have our own room. The boys share a room, and Meara has her own private little space. Jasper even has her own space. So we aren’t constantly bumping into each other. And there’s a huge amount of storage space. Yeah, I’m sold on Cats.”

We talked a bit about schoolwork, and Jeananne simply beamed — no other word. “I love teaching my kids. I just love it. We looked into various

homeschool courses and talked with the kids’ teachers at home, and we just decided to use the books they would be using in Edmonton. So we have Saint Christopher’s Boat School. That’s us. All our kids do very well in school and it’s working great. And Meara sits right there and has her lessons, too. She’s learning math, reading, and spelling at age 4 because she insists on it.”

Jeananne scooted forward at the table, getting even more enthusiastic. “You know, it is so great to really get to know your kids, to just get out of the soccer-mom syndrome. Now we can take all day to explore one little subject or thought if we want to. There isn’t any pressure here, it can all be fun, and at the same time, they are learning so much. For instance, we spent two and a half weeks in Washington, D.C., seeing everything. The kids just ate up the Smithsonian, even the parts we didn’t expect, like the art museum. It’s just great.”

Pat added to that: “I guess that’s the best part for me, too, watching my kids 24 hours a day, discovering new sides to them that I probably just wouldn’t see in a so-called “normal” family setting where I’m working 60 hours a week. And it’s fun to see how they work together. For instance, Liam is the dinghy captain. He has the responsibility of the dinghy and operates it when we use it. But at the same time, Liam has a sensitivity that I didn’t realize. Somebody asked Liam for his sandals and Liam felt he should give them away because the other person didn’t have any shoes at all, but then Liam really needs the sandals himself. So what should he do? That got us into a long discussion about moral responsibilities. Anyway, that’s the kind of things we get to do, being



*Meara, her grandmother and Jeananne are comfortable and at home aboard Cool Breeze.*

with our kids 24 hours a day. We get to teach them our own values. They aren't learning someone else's values we might not share."

I asked Jeananne what she thought was hard about living with a family of six on a boat, expecting to hear words like "laundry" and "meals" and "cleaning." She said, "I miss the intensity of a close relationship with other women. I miss my best friends at home. That, and sometimes at marinas, I feel like we don't fit into the cruising profile. We've seen other couples cruising with one or two, but never four kids."

I just had to ask her about shopping, laundry, and cleaning. "No, those things really aren't a big problem. Somehow, it all gets done."

I asked Pat the same thing, What's the hardest part? His answer was quick and to the point. "Docking. Well at least at the beginning it was, but now we all know what to do and we do it well. We're really hot stuff!"

But Pat Kirwin isn't your average guy. I got the feeling Pat sees a little further over the horizon than the rest of us. We discussed some more about what he was getting out of the adventure. "This is



*One big, happy family, the Kirwins are living a dream by living aboard.*

giving me a time for reflection. You know, I'm a litigation lawyer and I see some crazy stuff. It's a crazy pace of life we lead. Why do we do it? What's the point? I think I want to find a way to be more socially responsible. And this year, on the boat, with my family, is giving me the chance to think about that." Jeananne added, "I really enjoy the time to review and evaluate what we're doing and how we're doing it."

The Kirwins are doing what so many of us would like to do, or more significantly, what we wish we had done. I suppose some folks would say the Kirwins are living a dream, maybe even say they are living in a dream world, far from reality. But are they? How many

families do we know who could be "trapped" in a 35-foot boat for two and a half days in a howling storm and have a good time? Do you know any father who reads *Kidnapped* to his kids every night? I had the opportunity to meet Jeananne's mother when she flew into Cuba, and she says the kids are getting along even better with each other than ever before. As we parted company, the kids were preparing to spend a day in a Cuban school. And as another boater said,

"Those four kids are probably the best behaved, most pleasant children I have ever met, and that includes my own children and grandchildren."

Pat and Jeananne are obviously totally committed to each other, and committed to the responsibility of personally raising their children. I think they're onto something good.

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