

SHIFTING WINDS OPEN DOORS

Earning the top rank at the Portland Yacht Club creates a stir, but Leigh Palmer takes it all in stride.

By LARRY WOODWARD
Staff Writer

FALMOUTH — Leigh Palmer of Yarmouth was an energetic teenager when she first went to the Portland Yacht Club with her parents three decades ago.

She paid little heed to the older men in the blue blazers who presided at special events. But she has come to understand the meaning of the jacket.

Last week, Palmer donned her own blue blazer as the first woman commodore of one of the nation's oldest yacht clubs.

Palmer, 44, isn't the first woman commodore in Maine or the nation. But her election is significant because of the prestige of the Portland Yacht Club.

The club was incorporated in 1869 and is considered to be the third-

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Staff photo by John Patriquin

Leigh Palmer has moved steadily up the ranks and is now the Portland Yacht Club's first woman commodore. She'll oversee all aspects of running the 131-year-old club.

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st continuous club in the United States, behind the New York Yacht Club and the Southern Yacht Club of Orleans.

"This is a historical moment for the Portland Yacht Club and yachting in general," said Bud Singer, a former commodore.

Palmer's election is another sign that the sometimes snobby yachting world is changing. Another bastion of privilege has been opened to women. Palmer didn't seek the position to win anything.

"I'm not a feminist," Palmer said. "This club is steeped in tradition. I want to maintain that."

As commodore of the 340-member club, Palmer will oversee every aspect of its operation. The club has a \$1,000 budget and 40 to 50 employees in the summer.

The club is much more active now than when I became a member," Palmer said. "When I joined in 1981, a number of people were old-time members who no longer had boats kept their social memberships.

Now people want to sail and they want to have their kids involved. We have three sessions of the junior sailing program each summer and have more than 50 kids in each."

Palmer, who is proud to be the stay-at-home mother of three children, has been setting courses for the club for more than two decades.

She was the first woman commodore of the Portland Junior Yacht Club when she was a Yarmouth High senior in 1974. And she became the first woman on the PYC board of directors when she took charge of the junior program in 1985.

"Leigh has done it all," said Singer. "She's a hard worker and has earned her position. She is well respected by the members of the club. The people that are most active are her con-

temporaries."

One club member recalled that Palmer's election to the board created a stir among some of the older male members. One was overheard to say that he would resign if the club ever elected a woman commodore. He didn't live to see the day.

Now the 13-member PYC board includes two other women: Anne Blanchard and Coleen Thomas.

"There are two potential commodores right there," said Singer.

Palmer has served in practically every elected position in the club through her 16-year tenure. A few years ago when she was rear commodore, her presence at a party for the cruising Eastern Yacht Club of Marblehead, Mass., turned some heads.

"Eastern had 50 or 60 people here and I was one of the hosts," Palmer said. "Some of the women couldn't believe I was a flag officer. They were amazed."

Maine seems to have accepted the notion of female commodores more readily than other states. The first woman commodore in Maine is believed to be Sidney Rockefeller of Northeast Harbor Yacht Club. She was appointed about a year before Sidney LeFavour of Rockland was Camden Yacht Club's first woman commodore, from 1990 to 1994.

"The old guard was sort of cautious at first," said Frank Akers, a Portland real estate developer who was Camden's commodore in the early 1970s. "But so many things have changed over the years they kind of took it in stride."

Woody Emmanuel of Camden, another former commodore, said LeFavour was a natural for the position.

"She had been on the board a long time and we were very proud as a club to accept her," Emmanuel said. "Women have always had an important role in our club."

LeFavour said she was very well received.

"Yacht clubs can be a sort of

old-school-ties institution, but I had a great board who was very supportive," LeFavour said. "It went swimmingly."

At least two other women have served as commodore at smaller clubs along the coast. Sarah Everdell, a summer resident from Maryland, served at the Bucks Harbor Yacht Club last year. Flo DeGozzaldi, another summer resident, served there about four years ago.

The women all have something in common: a love of sailing.

Palmer's parents, Dave and Jean Semonite, joined the PYC in 1968 and brought their three children on board. Leigh, Ned and Ann (Bilodeau) grew up around the club and in the junior sailing program.

"Our vacations were spent sailing on the coast on my parents' boats," said Palmer. "And we were racing their Ensign in the early 1970s when the nationals were hosted by the club."

Palmer went to Connecticut College hoping to compete in intercollegiate sailing. She was disappointed.

"The college had an unorganized sailing program," she said. "The team had to hitchhike to Rhode Island for a regatta. The guy who was my crew had never sailed before."

Palmer went to work for Delta Airlines in Boston after graduation and in 1979 bought her own Ensign, a 22-foot keelboat that is a favorite for racing. She and a friend sailed the Ensign from Boston to Portland when she was transferred.

"I joined the club on my own in 1981, back when the man of the family held the membership in his name," Palmer said.

"When I joined, there weren't a lot of young people in the club. Over the past 10 years we've introduced family memberships and more folks with young kids have joined. Things have become pretty lively around here."

Palmer said she questioned the wisdom of former Commodore Larry Wilson when he asked her to take

charge of the junior club in 1985, opening the door for her to become a board member.

She ran the junior program for three years, but when daughter Libby was born to Palmer and her husband Jim, she asked to do something less demanding. She was named club secretary and served for five years, beginning her climb through the offices that eventually led to her becoming commodore.

Palmer ran the food and beverage service at the club for two years and then the waterfront. She was elected rear commodore and two years ago became vice commodore. She has been chairman of the Monhegan Island Race for the past three years.

Palmer's family remains active in the club. Her oldest children, 13-year-old Libby and 11-year-old Alan, have grown up in the junior program. Alan placed second this summer in the Maine State Optimist Championship, and Libby placed third. Two-year-old Ben joins the entire family in sailing aboard their 40-foot sailboat.

"This club is a second home for me and my family," said Palmer. "I'm realizing how much work it is to be the commodore. If I can do my part, I say, 'Let's do it.'"

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