





SPIRIT OF *America*

CATCHING THE SPIRIT

Program teaches boating, water safety to youths in the Iowa Great Lakes

By Greg Drees

Youngsters all, they took to the lakes and wetlands and rivers of the Iowa Great Lakes area in kayaks, canoes, sailboats, personal watercraft and boats large and small, learning how to navigate those waters knowledgeably. Buoyed by the success of the program elsewhere, several dozen youths embarked last summer on the Spirit of America program that taught them on-the-water seamanship and water safety principles.



SPiRiT OF America

**Mom,
Now that I'm in
Middle School, I
want to learn
how to sail and
drive the wave-
runner...by myself.
There is a course
that teaches me
how to canoe,
kayak, boat and
more. Can you
sign me up?**

The project was hatched when Gary Owen, head of the Lake Patrol for the Department of Natural Resources (DNR), began discourse with Cecelia Durer, a fellow board member of the National Water Safety Council (NWSC) in Washington, D.C. Durer is also the executive director of Spirit, and she and Owen saw the project as a natural fit for the Iowa Great Lakes area.

Owen brought the Spirit concept to the attention of the NWSC and they adopted it as the national boater education course. From there, the NWSC sought out quality areas in the country to expand the Spirit program. Owen, the quintessential salesman for the Iowa Great Lakes area, convinced the NWSC to bring the Spirit itinerary to northwest Iowa.

Owen also heads the Iowa Great Lakes Water Safety Council, which also sought to bring the Spirit of America program to the Okobojis. To make the project work locally, the facilitator status was then transferred to the Camp Foster YMCA Association, which includes the Bedell Family YMCA. Teresa "Bergie" Goehring, associate executive director of Camp Foster, credits Owen with achieving the coup. "I really believe with Gary's presence, abilities and national recognition we were able to get the program to the Iowa Great Lakes," Goehring said.

The lakes community, known for innovative partnering achievements, responded by forming an alliance of sponsors for the pro-

gram. Among those donating money, time, volunteerism and product to the effort are the DNR, Arnolds Park/Okoboji Fire and Rescue, Okoboji Yacht Club, area marinas and businesses.

The Spirit program is targeted for seventh and eighth graders in the Okoboji, Spirit Lake, Lake Park, Estherville and Spencer school districts. A certificate from the Iowa Boaters Education course, which is mandatory for 12 to 17-year olds to operate a boat with a horsepower of 10 or more, is also required for entry into the Spirit program.

Patrick Rice, volunteer student coordinator for Spirit of America, said a full itinerary awaited the students. "The kids were immersed in boating and water safety instructions from professionals who really know what they're doing," Rice said. "It was fun for the students and they will learn valuable skills."

Spirit was initiated on June 2, with a pool instruction course at the Bedell Family YMCA in Spirit Lake. Canoes, kayaks and sailboats were flipped over in the water and students were schooled on how to react to situations of being capsized. Classes on cold-water immersion, hypothermia and life jackets were also conducted.

Last summer, working in rotating groups, students were instructed in the operation of sailboats, canoes, kayaks, personal watercrafts and a variety of boats. Watercrafts range from small flat-bottom fishing boats, runabout ski

boats, DNR patrol boats and the Arnolds Park/Okobojo Fire and Rescue patrol boat. "This was hands-on and up close and personal for the kids," Owen said. "We took them to the Lake Patrol station, for instance, and also let them experience a fire patrol mission with water extrication."

Sailing classes were conducted at the tradition-rich Okobojo Yacht Club. "What better place for the students to learn the rewarding skills of sailing than at the Yacht Club," Owen said.

Not only will the kids experience instruction on the Iowa Great Lakes chain, but also in surrounding public waterways. "They experienced the wetlands, rivers and other water bodies in the area as well," Goehring said. "They got a well-rounded look at water navigation."

Both Owen and Goehring said they expect the Spirit program to flourish and



Remember sailboats have the right -of-way over power boats. Don't weave through congested areas or play chicken

grow in the lakes area. "I can see it expanding to two or three courses a season," Owen said. Goehring predicts word of the inaugural instruction will spawn increased interest. "I perceive in the future that kids who come to the lakes during the course of the summer will want to participate," she said.

Persons interested in registering youths for the Spirit of America program can call Camp Foster YMCA at 712-336-3272 for details.

Blue Water Rides

Relax or Party. Friends or Family.

Chartered Pontoons for all your needs!

Sit back and Enjoy the Blue Water Ride...

Tubing Available!

Be safe on the lake. Call Matt at 712-261-1468 to charter your next exciting adventure.

oakhillmarina.com/2004/rental.html