

“Big E” strikes a heartfelt chord with

BY PATRICK LAPINSKI

It was the end of October, Halloween 2014. Gale force winds from the north were churning Lake Huron into a maelstrom. The *Cason J. Callaway*, coming up the St. Clair River, was heading right toward it. Captain Mike Merrick decided to go to anchor in the river just below Recors Point until the storm blew itself out.

“That’s one of the only times I ever anchored right in that spot,” recalls Captain Merrick. “Usually, we’ll go out and run checked speed up the lake or stop by the buoys or somewhere out in Lake Huron. But that day I just didn’t feel comfortable going out into the lake, and so we stopped there and that’s how it all began.”

Sort of.

Meet Keith Baker, a wheelsman on the *Callaway*. Keith has been sailing on the Great Lakes for 21 years. He’s really into storm chasing, not the kind like the gale blowing to the north, but the tornado type you get on the hot plains of the Midwest. In fact, he calls himself ‘Storm Warrior’ on his Facebook page. Lately, however, Keith has gotten attention for something he did that has nothing to do with storm chasing. Out here on the Lakes, Keith noticed a different group of enthusiasts—a legion of self-proclaimed ‘Boatnerds,’ so he thought it would be fun to start a Facebook page showing what it’s like to work and

live on the boats. “It was a hit,” said Keith.

As the *Callaway* remained at anchor the following day, Keith checked his Facebook page. He had received a message from the father of a disabled young man living on the river, asking if they could blow a whistle salute to their son, Ethan. Keith had a hunch that the *Callaway* had gone to anchor close to where his Facebook follower lived, so he headed up to the pilothouse where he grabbed a pair of binoculars to scan the west side of the river.

“What are you looking for Keith?” Captain Merrick asked Baker.

“I’ve got a follower on my Facebook page who lives over there, and they have a disabled son who was injured in a bike accident,” answered Baker, telling the captain about the request.

“Well, tell him we’ll be leaving at 4 o’clock,” replied Merrick, “and we’ll go by nice and slow and blow a nice salute for him.”

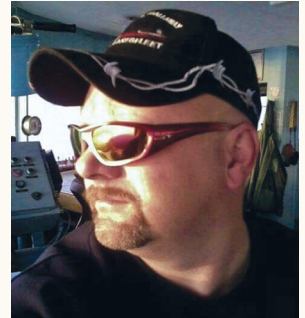
Baker contacted the follower to let him know when the *Callaway* would get underway and to expect a salute. Later that day, moving slowly northbound past Ethan’s house, Captain Merrick sounded a full master’s salute. Following the salute, he stepped out onto the bridge wing to give an extra wave, as well.

“I’ve got a big red foam hand on the boat that I use to wave to people as we’re going through piers, so I got out waving the red hand,” said Merrick.

Onshore, Ethan’s mother had a video camera rolling as the *Callaway* passed by, explained Baker, who has the video posted on his Facebook page. “The first, initial salute is on there, filmed by his mom, and you can hear them crying in the background because we told them over their VHF radio that this is for Ethan.”

That’s how it all began.

The recipient of the salute is Ethan “Big E” McCray, resident of East China, Mich., a small township along the St. Clair River, about four hours sailing time north of Detroit. Ethan was born in Colorado, but by his teens had



Keith Baker



Mike Merrick



Captain Mike Merrick waves a big, red foam hand to *Cason J. Callaway* fan, Ethan “Big E” McCray.

Courtesy Mike Merrick

Great Lakes Fleet captains and crews

moved to Tennessee. It was there, in East Greenville, where Ethan became a star athlete on the football team. He played baseball and basketball, was involved in his local church and was a cadet in his high school's Junior ROTC program.

Then came the unthinkable. One weekend afternoon, while riding bikes with his younger brother, Ethan signaled the car behind him that he was going to turn left. The driver thought he signaled her to pass.

The day was December 19, 2005. Karen McCray was on her shift at North Side Hospital in Johnson City when she heard about the accident. The ambulance was heading to North Side's sister hospital when Karen got the phone call about her son, Ethan. They said he was "OK" was all Karen thought about as she rushed to be with her son. When she arrived in the trauma room, she realized it was far worse than she'd imagined.

Karen waited hours while surgeons labored over Ethan. The hours seemed like an eternity to Karen, as would the next few days and weeks as he clung to life in the ICU. Ethan had survived, but lay deep in a coma. Long after the surgery was over, Karen continued waiting, wondering whether her son would ever wake up.

Ethan eventually did awaken, eight months later. He was still 15, but it was now 2006. Ethan was paralyzed on the right side, had limited motion with his left arm, and was unable to speak. Karen was told to not expect much, but no one told her to stop believing. She was not giving up on Ethan.

"We had a homebound teacher for the next three years of high school," Karen said, adding that Ethan exceeded expectations, but it was not easy by any means.

Ethan graduated from high school, but was locked in an internal struggle to adjust to his physical condition and his inability to communicate verbally.

Ethan's friends moved on to college and eventually drifted away, leaving him increasingly isolated, and, as Karen found out, there's no shortage of change to go around. In the wake of the accident, her marriage to Ethan's father fell apart, but she united with John Morrison, who is now Ethan's stepfather. A change of scenery was needed so the family headed north to Michigan, landing in a small rental along the St. Clair River.



Courtesy Kenneth Houseal

Kenneth Houseal, Ethan McCray with mom and stepfather, Karen and John Morrison.

As anyone along the river knows, ships pass by at all hours of the night and day during the shipping season. It wasn't long before John and Ethan also established an affinity for the ships gliding past their front window. So, as the *Callaway* rode at anchor on that snotty fall day, Karen and John decided to contact the fellow with the website. Maybe they could get the ship to salute Ethan, to brighten his day.

"It just kind of escalated from there," said Merrick.

Soon, all of the other ships in the Great Lakes Fleet joined in as Merrick and Baker shared the story. John has since painted the sea wall outside of their place the colors of the Great Lakes Fleet to celebrate and honor the many new friends Ethan made as a result of this one single act of kindness.

Captain Merrick retired in mid-2015, and, as the season continued, the new captain continued blowing the salute to Ethan. Then one day the unthinkable happened, again. The *Callaway* didn't blow a salute to Ethan as they passed by. It literally sent a ripple of chatter over the social media networks, all the way to the fleet office in Duluth.

Onboard the *Callaway* that trip was Kenneth Houseal, a cadet from the Great Lakes Maritime Academy.

"The *Cason J. Callaway* is Ethan's favorite boat, so it had kind of become like a little big deal online. That's the

"Big E" Continued on page 6

first time I read about it,” said Kenneth, from Traverse City, Mich. “On our way back upbound we definitely remembered to give him a salute, and they posted, ‘Thanks to the *Cason J. Callaway* for giving us a salute today.’”

Ethan had found a new champion.

Kenneth was born in Gainesville, Fla., but was raised in the small town of Dawsonville, Ga., After high school, he was unsure what to do with his life. He literally went to the ends of the earth to figure it out, beginning with a thru-hike of the Appalachian Trail, a period learning Chinese and living abroad in China and Mongolia.

“I went and lived in Mongolia for six months, had one just insane adventure, came back and my dad goes, ‘Hey, what are you going to do with your life?’” Kenneth recalled.

He still didn’t know. His dad suggested joining the Merchant Marine.

Kenneth’s next big adventure would begin with a “harrowing” 945-mile winter car ride from Georgia to Traverse City to look at the Maritime Academy.

“When you’re in Georgia, in the mountains, finding out exactly what the Merchant Marine is can be a confusing task,” Kenneth said. “It took me a long time to realize that the people that are in the Merchant Marine aren’t even called merchant marines, they’re merchant *mariners*.”

Just like that, Kenneth had found his calling, and

“What may be something small to you, such as the sounding of a ship’s horns, can be the world to someone else.”

—Kenneth Houseal,
Great Lakes Maritime Academy cadet

something he wasn’t expecting.

While he wasn’t always sure what he wanted to do for a living, Kenneth knew that he wanted to make a difference in people’s lives.

“When it comes to people with disabilities, I’ve always had a real big soft spot,” said Kenneth. “Ethan’s about the same age as me, so it kind of hit home that, hey, that could be me, I could be living his life, wanting to be out there, wanting to work, wanting to do things, wanting to explore and see, and I have this chance.”

While learning his trade on the Lakes, Kenneth spent his spare time getting to know as much as he could about Ethan and his family. He hopes his efforts, along with those of the Great Lakes Fleet, can expand to the Boatnerd community and others to be a positive influence in Ethan’s life.

“I don’t want to leave anybody behind,” Kenneth said. “He’s obviously a passionate individual. He loves the ships, and I always knew I wanted to help, and I wanted to do it on a more localized level than donate to a charity online.”

Ethan’s story struck a chord with Kenneth that went straight to the heart.

“It is with no small measure of pride that I say I’m thankful to have been a part of the Fleet for the past two years. Blowing salutes and hearing Ethan’s family thank us over the radio. What may be something small to you, such as the sounding of a ship’s horns, can be the world to someone else. To the guys at the Fleet that started all this, y’all are amazing!” said Kenneth in his southern drawl.

In January, Kenneth wrote for his 3rd Mate’s license. He hopes his two years of hard work at the Academy will pay off and lead to a job with Great Lakes Fleet. In spite of our best laid plans, life offers no guarantees, as Ethan’s story illustrates.

“Ethan fights battles every day, and I’m doing my best to include him in what he loves ...The Great Lakes Fleet,” Kenneth said. “I hope that after I graduate, I will be able to continue to work here and continue to bring a smile to Big E’s face.”

Patrick Lapinski, maritime photographer, historian and author from Superior, Wis., is celebrating his 40th year of capturing the images and voices of the Great Lakes Maritime industry. To see and read more, please visit: <http://www.inlandmariners.com>



Courtesy Kenneth Houseal

Kenneth Houseal and Ethan McCray smile upon hearing the *Callaway*’s salute as it passes in the background.