

WILLIAM JOHN MEISNER

Feb. 26, 1952 – Dec. 15, 2020

I first met Bill in 1998 when we signed our two kids up for the Learn to Sail Program down at the Naples Landing.

When I picked up the kids after the first lesson my daughter said “Mom, I don’t want to go back tomorrow, I think Coach Bill yelled at me”, my son quickly replied “Tootie, he didn’t yell at you, Coach Bill doesn’t need a bullhorn, his voice already has one built in it”.

Needless to say, “the rest is history”.

In 2002 when I decided to launch the Collier County Sailing Center down at Sugden Park for Collier County Parks & Recreation I knew we were going to need advice from Bill.

When the Sailing Center & Freedom Waters decided to host our first Special Needs Regatta named “We Gotta Regatta” I knew I could only call one guy to run it and help us out. It actually was Collier County Sailing Center’s debut with hosting a regatta, we knew we had to get it right. It was after all the North American Access Dinghy Nationals so we had to have a pro’s pro running the show.

Even though Bill didn’t work for The Sailing Center yet, he willingly agreed to help. I don’t think he realized then what a life changing event it would be and what he was getting into.

Not only for the sailors but all our volunteers & staff as well. Little did I know a few short years later I would need a Coach to replace our Instructor that had transferred to a different Park. It was the beginning of a dynasty. Over the next 16 years Bill & I shared an office. He taught thousands of young kids, teens, adults and special needs students how to sail.

Not only was he a phenomenal instructor but he also took great pride in all the students over the years that he mentored. Once you met Bill, you were a lifelong friend, all of our Summer Camp Sailing Counselors & Junior Leaders stayed in touch with him, many long after college graduation, he attended so many weddings of past counselors or students. Bill was rarely left off the invite list. Dinners, track meets, high school baseball games & when there was a baby announcement he was on that list as well. Coach Bill knew it wouldn’t be long before he’d be teaching kids of kids that he had already taught.

He was the epitome of a real team player, something you don’t see very often.

He never met a kid he didn’t like. Regardless of students' behavior, he knew we could help them & would always say “hopefully one day that sailor will look back and remember how I gave them the benefit of the doubt and refused to give up on him/her”. He wanted each student to leave with a smile on their face & have fond memories of their time on the water at Sugden Park. He truly believed, “the canvas could do miracles, just you wait and see”

It worked. He was also notorious for his incredible reference letters he would author for various colleges from coast to coast. It never failed, months later he would come into the office and quietly say “oh, so & so got into Stanford or so & so got into the Naval Academy” always with a little sparkle in his eye, he knew that he had helped another student of his get in to the college of their dreams, many of whom even competed on the sailing teams at the collegiate level. Coach Bill never had to boast or brag, he knew all those lessons or long hot summer camp days had paid off once again. Rarely did you ever

hear him mention sailors who he had coached that had made it to the Olympics, his actions spoke volumes and he felt there was no need for accolades other than making sure the athletes' hard work & determination were recognized.

It didn't matter what time or what day it was, he was always just a phone call away if we needed him. In a moments notice, he was at the park, he'd come meet his counselors if they had a flat tire, you name it, a grandparent that thought their grandchild needed a little extra coaching, Bill was always willing to help.

Every morning as he climbed out of his SUV I was always greeted with a big grin as he entered the sailing center and of course a "gooooood morning, how are you"? & then he would promptly tell me how his beloved Michigan Wolverines did the day before in any sporting event they played in. Hockey , Basketball, Football, it didn't matter, Bill was a rabid sports fan. I of course would always reply with "Gooooooo Irish" and he'd chuckle under his breath.

As the years went by we all realized just how brilliant Bill was. A total "phone a friend genius". The topic or subject matter was irrelevant, he knew the answer. Music, sports, movies... oh, & let's not forget trivia. He was the master at that also, ask the owner of Foxboro, he can vouch for Bill's incredible knowledge. Each afternoon after he left the lake he would swing by to meet his wife there and grab a bite and play a little trivia before he called it a night. He was ranked nationally in trivia and was always willing to share that knowledge with all of us. He had almost every credential you could have with US Sailing, he was on the Canadian Ski Patrol, he was a pilot, high school umpire, baseball coach & home inspector, you name it, he did it. All that time we were lucky enough to call him "ours" for 16 years down here at the Sailing Center.

We miss that, we miss Bill & I'm not sure anyone will ever be able to fill his shoes. He was like a brother to me & an incredible friend to my family. A confidant to all the high school & college kids that he adored, a gentle soul & a real gem, they definitely broke the mold with William John Meisner.

We lost one of the best. He was known by so many but I was lucky enough to have him as a co-worker & friend since meeting in 1998. He is truly missed beyond measure. He's left his mark on the sailing community & then some here in Naples, Florida.

Fairwinds & following seas Coach Bill, we love & miss you.

Rest In Peace

We'll see you at the Yacht Club upstairs, until then save a seat for me at the trivia bar.

We love you Bill-um

Or has he would sign everything Will-I-am

xoxo