

John Curtis

BY ANN-MAUREEN OWENS
WITH PHOTOGRAPHY BY BERNARD CLARK



WHEN JOHN CURTIS FIRST COMPETED IN THE 1985 CANADIAN OLYMPIC-TRAINING Regatta, Kingston (CORK), he realized this was the place for him. He was still a high school student, deciding where to apply for university, and sailing was his passion. The ideal conditions that make Kingston the epicentre of dinghy sailing in Canada drew him to apply to Queen's University and to stay on to make this city his home. "It's a beautiful city, but the water and what you can do on it here is what attracted me," he says, noting that Kingston has the best freshwater sailing in the world.

That is also what currently attracts him to volunteer his expertise to help establish the International Sailing Centre of Excellence at Kingston, part of the Hatter's Bay Project to sustainably develop the Kingston Penitentiary site.

Born and raised in Barrie, Ontario, John was introduced to sailing at age five at his family's cottage on Georgian Bay, though he notes that his first experience with his father in their Laser almost put him off the sport. "I still remember being scared of the hum of the daggerboard when the boat got up on a plane." Growing up, he spent every summer on the water, taking lessons and then instructing at the Barrie Yacht Club. John and his sister, Andrea, an author who writes about boats, still race an Albacore at the family cottage in Pointe-au-Baril.

John credits his father for his interest in sail racing: "When I was about nine years old, he decided to let me steer the family boat in races on Lake Simcoe. I was not really strong enough to pull on all the ropes, so this was a good fit, and it gave me tremendous confidence as I learned how to do this exciting activity with my dad as somewhat of a peer. My mom sailed with us as well, and her encouragement to think big has always been a guiding force."

During the school year, John played trombone in the school band at Barrie Central Collegiate and enjoyed being part of the orchestra in the school's drama productions. During his first two years of undergrad study, he played in the Queen's band, until the need to focus on his studies forced him to choose one extracurricular activity. He chose the one closest to his heart, competitive sailing, which would eventually lead him to represent Canada at the 2004 Olympics in Athens.

John's 16 years on Canada's National Sailing Team began in his last year of undergraduate studies, and it required four weeks of winter training camp in Florida, as well as intense physical training throughout the year. "I think mine was the last generation to do this kind of high-level sport at the same time as being a full-time student. I was on the national team all through law school in the early '90s. Today the focus and level of excellence required would mean a complete break from school."

After completing his philosophy degree, John took two years to

concentrate on sailing before entering Queen's Law School for what he calls "applied philosophy studies." Philosophy had afforded him the chance to think deeply about concepts of truth, justice and fairness, and sailboat racing had honed his competitive streak, so John was initially drawn to litigation. But unlike sport at its best, litigation's focus on winning or losing, sometimes on technical points, is not always set up to be fair. "It's so adversarial that it's often a bad way to help people solve their problems and can even make the problem worse. It takes a long time, years, to reach resolution, and frequently, no one is happy with the results."

"The litigation process is also hard on lawyers, and I found that often the best way for me to help people resolve their difference was through mediation." This became his focus in 2001 when he established his own practice concentrating on employment law. Mediation involves helping people figure out what is in their best interest rather than being stuck on demanding their "rights" at whatever cost. It also lets each side express what is important to them and hear each other. "When we let in other perspectives, often the problem melts away, and a settlement can be reached very quickly. Mediation helps people to see the other party as not entirely bad."

With changes to legislation in 2010, requiring investigation of harassment in the workplace, John began using many of the same skills required in his mediation and adversarial work as an investigator for claims of workplace harassment especially. He gets called in on sensitive cases in which allegations are made against senior staff — listening, gathering the facts, writing a decision and justifying his findings. "If an investigator's findings are ever scrutinized by a court or arbitrator, they need to be thorough and reasoned the way lawyers reason things, or they will not stand up." This investigation work, similar to the work of an arbitrator, has led to work as an arbitrator in commercial disputes.

Whether as mediator, investigator or arbitrator, addressing workplace conflict is a focus of John's practice because he sees real value in tackling it — financial savings, increased productivity and a happier environment for everyone. The gatekeepers of workplace conflict are HR managers and senior staff. John works with them to ensure the conflict resolution process used is minimally intrusive and optimized for the situation. Only about 10 percent of John's legal practice now consists of conventional lawyer's work, as he sees Alternative Dispute Resolution (ADR) as a more effective way of resolving disputes.

John teaches ADR techniques through the Mediation Centre of Southeastern Ontario, which he co-founded in 2001. The Centre offers 40-hour certificate courses in ADR skills. John teaches the Negotiation Skills course and is lead instructor for the Advanced Mediation Skills course. Every year, he is part of the RCMP's Negotiations Course faculty, is a learning facilitator for the Conflict and Dispute section of St. Lawrence College's Corporate Learning and



Photo: Suzy Lamont

Performance Improvement Program and has taught ADR and negotiation courses at his alma mater's law school, still appearing as a guest lecturer.

After law school, John married and started a family. He began his career but in 2001 took time away to train full-time to qualify for the 2004 Summer Olympics. He and teammate Oskar Johansson gave a credible performance sailing in the Tornado class, finishing 15th overall. After the Olympics,

John worked as high performance manager and general counsel at the Canadian Yachting Association.

Law and sailing continue to be intertwined for John. In 2008, a supportive client suggested he incorporate and lead a sport charity. Called Wind Athletes Canada, it provides financial and logistical support for aspiring Olympic sailors and undertakes activities to promote the sport. Athletes like Danielle Boyd are grateful for this help. "We would not have raised the money we needed without the services Wind Athletes Canada provided. John is an extremely positive and helpful

guy who shared his own Olympic experience to help in our planning. That support helped get us to the [2016] Olympics!"

In 2011, John took on both a sailing and filmmaking challenge when acting for another client. O CANADA, a high-tech ocean-racing sailboat, was stranded in New Zealand when its solo skipper (Derek Hatfield) had to drop out of a round-the-world race. To salvage his client's investment, John managed the boat's refurbishment and new racing roster with a crew of five former Olympians. He took part in racing it from California to Hawaii and contributed to four documentaries about it: *Racing Around the World Alone*, *The O CANADA Project*, *The California Campaign* and *The Transpac*.

Last year, O CANADA had another starring role when John married Kathleen Vollebregt onboard, attended by their children: Kathleen's sons Mitchell (23) and Josh (19) and John's son Jamie (19) and daughter Annika (16).

John shared his love of sailing with his children and others at the Kingston Yacht Club (KYC). "My kids are good sailors, but they have developed other interests. We used to race a trimaran together with their friends and have many great memories." He is president of the Queen's Sailing Team Alumni Booster Club and remains involved with Able Sail Kingston, an initiative he helped to found in 2000.

Able Sail Kingston, a successful and popular program at KYC, introduces sailing to people with disabilities. Boats are adapted to suit individual needs, whether hand levers or foot pedals are required or a "sip and puff" mechanism that allows the sailor to manage the boat with his or her breath. "With my own Olympic sailing, I realized how a two-person team can become part of a bigger organism that includes the boat, and the focus is on how the boat moves through the water rather than individual tasks performed by the sailors. Disabled sailors have told me they feel connected to the boat as an extension of their own bodies in this same way," John says enthusiastically, noting he has moved from hands



Before John Curtis began his studies and career as a mediation lawyer, he was a competitive sailor, representing Canada at the 2004 Olympics in Athens. Law and sailing still continue to be intertwined in his life.

they only stay for a few weeks. Our sailors have to travel to Europe to train and get the level of competition they require. We have the best sailing location and the shortest sail-commute of any sailboat-racing venue, but we need improved land-based facilities to

-on involvement to more of a cheerleader/fundraising role with Able Sail.

For the past five years, John's volunteer time and expertise has been focused on the Hatter's Bay Project — a community initiative proposed by former Queen's vice-principal George Hood and Dr. Michael de la Roche,

a 1976 Olympic sailor — which also includes former mayor Harvey Rosen and management consultant and competitive sailor George Jackson. The group wants to preserve the heritage buildings of the former Kingston Penitentiary and re-purpose them into an international sail-training centre and wind research facility in conjunction with other community uses. "What John brings to the project," explains George, "are his connections to the sailing community across Canada, his energy, expertise, teamwork and tenaciousness to bring this vision to fruition for the benefit of future competitive sailors and coaches."

John says, "CORK already brings the world here, but

attract the best coaches and to house a fleet of boats for the rest of the world to come here and train. It would really benefit Canadian competitors and enhance Kingston's natural advantages, giving us a monopoly on world-class sailing."

Recently, John has taken up other seasonal wind sports: kiteboarding in summer and iceboating in winter. "Iceboating extends the season for competitive wind sport," says John, who is commodore of the Canadian DN Iceboats Association. Not only does he compete in international races, he makes iceboats in his backyard workshop, including the blades that skim the ice at incredible speeds. He has built seven so far, two for himself and five for friends, and hopes to include his son Jamie, who is studying to become a welder, in the process, once he acquires a welding machine.

John's sailing experiences have helped shape his life, and he tries to bring the Olympic spirit of competitive camaraderie and cooperative problem solving to whatever he does, whether mediating employment disputes, sailing, or helping to find solutions for everyone who has an interest in a new defining role for the penitentiary site that once defined the city. ■