

LocalFeature

What's happening

The Northford Congregational Church, at the intersections of Routes 22 and 17, will be having a pancake brunch on Dec. 17, from 11 a.m. to noon.

Hitting the high seas down under

By Diana Stricker
For the Branford Review

Dennis Perkins loves to tell stories about people living on the edge. But he doesn't rely on others for inspiration; he believes in living the adventures.

On Dec. 26, Perkins will participate in one of the world's most challenging ocean races -- Australia's Sydney to Hobart Yacht Race, which begins in Sydney Harbor and ends 628 nautical miles later in Hobart, Tasmania.

His team of sailors will retrace the voyage of the AFR Midnight Rambler, the boat that won the 1998 race against extreme odds. Hurricane winds that year claimed six lives and forced 71 of the 115 yachts to drop out of the competition.

"I read the story of the Midnight Rambler and I was so impressed," says the 64-year-old Branford resident. "They were truly a team."

Perkins is chief executive officer of The Syncretics Group, an internationally known Branford-based consulting firm, and a former professor in the Yale School of Management.

In his work, he and his partners use survival stories as examples of leadership and teamwork. For more than 25 years, he has lectured and given presentations to a wide range of people and organizations.

"It's a fun approach. It travels across cultures. It's a story and it's metaphor," Perkins says. "Survival is a basic instinct."

He coined the term "Metadventure," which is his method of using adventure stories as a metaphor for professional and personal endurance.

"It works with lots of different individuals. I have given these talks to CEOs of Fortune 500 companies, to agencies fighting terrorism, to the East Harlem Community Center, and to the Branford Police Department."

Perkins wanted to add the story of the Midnight Rambler to his repertoire.

To better understand the dynamics of the sailing team, he traveled to Australia to interview Ed Psaltis and the crew of the Midnight Rambler. He was invited to accompany them on a sailing excursion.

"It was great because I was largely observing the crew in action," Perkins says.

But he knew he could create more vivid correlations about the experiences of the crew if he entered the competition. "I became engrossed in the race. There's a flavor to this race that is different," Perkins says. "It's a test of seamanship and perseverance."

This will not be the first time Perkins has re-enacted an adventure. A previous excursion took him to Antarctica,

where he retraced the steps of famed explorer Ernest Shackleton, whose 1914 expedition became stranded on ice floes for 23 months.

Perkins' journeys began years ago with a simple quest -- to find a unique way to communicate his ideas about leadership and teamwork.

A graduate of the U.S. Naval Academy at Annapolis, Md., Perkins served as a Marine infantry officer in Vietnam. He later earned his MBA at Harvard University, and received a doctoral degree in psychology at the University of Michigan.

When he began teaching at the Yale School of Management, he wanted to find a new way to teach leadership skills. Drawing on his experiences in Vietnam, he decided to use insights from people facing physical adversity and living at the edge.

"I started looking at lots of survival stories," Perkins says. "I felt Shackleton's story encapsulated the principles I wanted to convey. ... I eventually went to Antarctica and followed in Shackleton's footsteps."

In 1998, he co-authored a book "Leading at the Edge: Leadership Lessons from the Extraordinary Saga of Shackleton's Antarctic Expedition." The book is skillfully crafted to compare the explorer's leadership abilities to examples in today's business world. It includes corporate case studies and 10 strategies for success.

"Leading at the Edge" is also a term that his company has trademarked for use in their consulting business.

Perkins' current focus is on developing leadership in organizations that are facing rapid change, economic adversity or challenging demands.

He will document his experiences in the Sydney to Hobart Race and use them in his consulting, coaching and educational sessions.

Sailors have been drawn to the Australian race since its inception in 1945. The course is known for high winds, challenging seas and unpredictable weather.

Severe storms hit the race in 2004, when only 59 of the 116 boats were able to complete the course. The record was set in 2005 with a finish time of 1 day, 18 hours, 40 minutes and 10 seconds.

"This will be the basis of another presentation and another book," Perkins says. "The hallmark of the firm is pushing the edge. It's also a personal challenge. It's possible I may not succeed."



Dennis Perkins sets sail on Dec. 26 to participate in Australia's Sydney to Hobart Yacht Race.

Photo by Paul Kessler

He has spent considerable time preparing for the race. "I've tried to do as much racing as possible and stay in as good shape as possible. And I'll say a lot of Hail Marys."

He said that sleep deprivation during the race will be a challenge, as well as not having as much sailing expertise as most of the team. "But I'm pretty resourceful," he says with a smile. "If I can do the race, it will be a huge feeling of accomplishment."

He left for Australia Dec. 11 to begin final preparations. He will be meeting most of the crew for the first time, and he has never sailed on the type of boat they will be using -- a Volvo Ocean Race 60.

His sailing partner will videotape the event, including the days leading up to the race when the crew is evolving into a team.

The 14 crew members will spend 10 days getting to know each other and learning each other's strengths and weaknesses. "It's a puzzle that has to be put together," Perkins says of the team's dynamics.

The trip to Australia is not the only journey Perkins embarked on this month.

About a week before his departure, he married a Branford physician, Dr. Susan O'Malley. His children and grandchildren participated in the ceremony. Perkins has a son, Jonathan; a daughter, Holly; three granddaughters, and a grandson.

Perkins says his bride will not accompany him on the adventure, but she understands why he is going. "She realized I need to do this," he says, noting that he will miss being home for the holidays. "This will be my most unusual Christmas, other than Vietnam."

He has been invited to spend New Year's Eve at a celebration in Hobart with the Midnight Rambler crew. "The idea of being able to spend New Year's Eve with those guys I admire will be tremendously satisfying, and knowing that I was able to complete the race."

Perkins is no stranger to world travel, having traveled extensively while his father had a career in the U.S. Navy.

"Personally, I'm an explorer, but not necessarily just a physical explorer," Perkins says when asked to describe himself. "I like to try new things. I'm trying to make the world a better place. That was my father's mantra."

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