

MidWeek

Paddling With A Purpose In Boston

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Last April, we said aloha to one of Hawaii's finest oceanmen in the waters off Kailua Beach. Aka Hemmings unconditionally served those with disabilities and firmly believed there are no limitations in life. Hemmings was the founder of Pure Light, an organization that provided outrigger canoe racing opportunities for those with disabilities. Hemmings' legacy has reached far beyond Hawaii's shores. Just ask William Yates, who was born and raised in Honolulu but now calls Boston home.



2012 Mayor's Cup Regatta in Boston. Photo from [AccesSportAmerica](#)

"I was classmates with (Aka's brother) Fred at Punahou," says Yates, vice president of Wealth Management at Cambridge Trust Company. "Aka and I got involved in adaptive paddling about the same time, and he and I would exchange ideas on how we can better serve those with disabilities."

Yates left Punahou in the seventh grade and attended boarding school on the Mainland. Even though his family remained in Hawaii and his roots to the Islands were always deep, Yates started paddling late in life in, of all places, Boston.

"I took up paddling because I was homesick," explains Yates. "I met someone who knew Blake Conant, who also lived here. Blake is now back in Hanalei on Kauai, but before he went home, he got outrigger canoe racing going on the East Coast. He and Aka were good friends."

Yates' passion for outrigger canoe paddling grew, and he started building four-man canoes for other paddlers on the East Coast.

"I hired somebody 12 years ago to design four-man outrigger canoes that were more suitable for our ocean conditions," says Yates. "We've built more than 100 canoes, and we've given away a number of them to adaptive athletes."

But Yates wanted more. Like Hemmings, Yates wanted to provide more paddling opportunities for those with disabilities. In 2004, his vision became a reality when he founded The Mayor's Cup Regatta in Boston, an outrigger canoe race that brought together people of all abilities, even those with disabilities.

"This was nothing like you see back home. Everyone who paddled at this regatta was a novice, but the 15 or 16 teams that competed had a great time," says Yates.

In 2005, 40 corporate and philanthropic teams participated in the regatta, which raised \$150,000 to benefit AccesSportAmerica. The national nonprofit organization supports programs that enable children and adults with disabilities to engage in high-challenge athletics.

"We get corporations to sponsor teams like the Boston College and Harvard University football teams," says Yates. "We have three world-class rowers who operate the docks for us, and these people are in tears at the end of the day because it's such a moving experience for them."

Yates says that over the past 10 years, the Mayor's Cup has raised close to \$2 million.

On Saturday, more than 40 teams with at least one person with a disability will once again compete in a Hawaiian outrigger canoe race on the Charles River to benefit AccesSportAmerica. And as he does every year, Yates and his race committee will host a Hawaiian luau.

"We don't have any poi, but we have some lomi lomi salmon and the chefs make a gallant effort at kalua pig," chuckles Yates. "Debby and Bill Belichick (New England Patriots head football coach) are very involved in this event. Debbie spends the day teaching people how to string leis."

And over the years, Yates has shed his share of tears as well.

"It's very fulfilling for me, and I'm just so proud of Hawaii," says Yates. "And it's not just seeing paddling take off on the East Coast. It's knowing the sport, our state team sport, is changing the lives of people, giving them hope, confidence and real sense of accomplishment." *rkmizutani@gmail.com*