

Destination: the world

A South African yachtsman overcomes incredible challenges—with the help of his local library

BY ALICE SNEARY

Neal Petersen is not your typical yachtsman. Born in South Africa under Apartheid, the future world traveler started his life under very different circumstances. You would never have guessed he would learn navigation and boat design in a library—and go on to become the first black man to race solo around the world.



He quickly read everything available in the “colored” library—libraries were segregated under Apartheid—and he had to go to the “white” library to continue to learn about sailing.

One brave white librarian, Letta Naudee of the Wynberg Public Library, risked everything to provide Neal with access to the knowledge he craved. She would sneak books out the back door for him, bravely defying the social and political laws at that time. At the library, he learned the principles of navigation, how to design and build a racing boat, and the technical aspects of sailing. He took that knowledge to the marina, convinced a few wealthy, white yachtsmen to take a chance and let him crew on their boats, and he was on his way to fulfilling his dream of sailing around the world in a race.

Neal experienced plenty of setbacks along the way before he reached his goal. But he was dedicated to the idea that no barriers would stand in the way, be they physical, cultural or economic. He even lived in Ireland for a time, when he'd managed to sail there but did not have the funds to either return home or continue with the race he had entered.

You see, when Neal was born, he had a defective hip socket and couldn't walk. As a child, he underwent a number of surgeries to rebuild his hip.

As he recovered, his mother made sure Neal developed a deep love of reading, knowledge and information that would serve him well for his life's adventures. Her background as a teacher and his father's income as a diver meant they could not afford much beyond the basic necessities. Their financial hardship, combined with the political and social oppression of Apartheid, pushed Neal to discover the riches of the library.

He first entered the Around Alone solo yacht race—then called the BOC Challenge—in 1994. Midway through the race, a storm damaged his mast beyond repair and he had to turn back.

Finally, in 1998, when he was 30 years old, Neal decided to go for his dreams again. At 27,000 miles, the Around Alone is the longest race for individuals of any sport; it has been called one of sailing's ultimate challenges. That year, the race had four legs: it started in Charleston, South Carolina and visited Cape Town, South Africa, stopped in Auckland, New Zealand, journeyed to Punta del Este in Uruguay and finally pulled back into Charleston harbor. When he finished the race 195 days after he started, Neal made history. He had become the first black man to race solo around the world.

The Discovery Channel, PBS and numerous other media outlets have told Neal's story. Now OCLC is telling it on behalf of libraries, with its latest advocacy ad in *Governing* magazine. We caught up with Neal and his wife, Darlene, in Puerto Rico while they tested new navigation equipment on their new boat. The following is an excerpt from that interview:

- Q:** Do you remember any particular materials in the library that made an impression on you?
- A:** I got very interested in the technical aspects of sailing, sextant navigation and how to design boats from the library. I read and reread Joshua Slocum's *Sailing Alone Around the World*, Francis Chichester's *Gypsy Moth Circles the World*, and a lot of technical books on design and boat-building. There was only one sailing magazine in South Africa at the time—but I could get many European sailing magazines from the library.
- Q:** From your success as an explorer and an entrepreneur, do you have any advice for libraries?
- A:** If librarians succeed, it will be felt for generations. They have such a powerful impact on society—and there's strong ripple effect for that, too. With all the technology and information options these days, libraries and librarians must have the courage to risk and focus on the end game. Educators are the cornerstone of free society. Sometimes I wonder if the libraries don't realize they they're an essential part of the educational ecosystem.

- Q:** How long did it take you to write your book, *Journey of a Hope Merchant*?
- A:** Five years. It was published in 2004 by the University of South Carolina Press. It was very rewarding to have won the National Outdoor Book Award for it in 2005. As a writer, I hope someone someday still says, “That's a good book.”
- Q:** These days, you spend a lot of time doing motivational speaking. Tell me more about that.
- A:** Yes, I love being able to inspire people with my story, and help them try to find their own hooks into how they can overcome challenges. I have proven what can happen when you truly believe in the power of a dream.

I believe in the inverted pyramid. If I can make a positive impact on two people, then those two people can impact two more people, and it grows exponentially from there. My job as a speaker is to leave the audience better than they were before. ■

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