



GEOFF HILTON-BARBER with the yacht he is building, discusses the "Great Paint" charity day with Cheryl Moreira, PRO for Medite Shipping.

Blind yachtsman to run sailing course for visually handicapped

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Carolyn Howie

AN enthusiastic blind yachtsman, who is building his own 10m yacht, plans to start sailing courses for the visually handicapped in Durban, to give them confidence and to share with them the sheer joy of sailing.

Geoff Hilton-Barber, who is director of the Natal Society for the Blind and has been blind for many years, believes strongly that disabled people should remain fit and at their correct weight.

"Many disabled people become overweight, don't feel good about themselves and this can only contribute to their problems," said Geoff, who is a keen road-runner and yachtsman, having been sailing for the last 15 years.

"Blind people want to be accepted both at work and in their leisure activities as normal members of society, and sailing and running are two sports in which we can compete equally with sighted people and enjoy mixing socially afterwards.

Four years ago he went to England to look at machinery for making floral ribbon and has since set up in Durban the only plant of its kind in South Africa.

While he was in the UK he went on an advanced sailing course for blind sailors and found that there were areas in which a blind sailor can be as competent as his sighted peers. For example, an audio compass enables a blind person to steer as accurately as a sighted one.

On the course, which was out of Falmouth and sailing along the Devon and Cornwall coasts, two sighted and two blind sailors went out for a week, sleeping on board in ports along the coast.

"Obviously the course we want to run in Durban will initially be confined to the calmer waters of the Bay.

but once proficient, students could experience the thrill of the Richards Bay to Durban course, for example.

He explained that sighted sailors might not want to shoulder the responsibility of taking out a blind person who was keen to learn but on the course he would be able to give them the benefit of his experiences as a blind sailor.

He is currently building his second boat and has incorporated ideas he has gleaned from sailing his previous one, which will help blind people to sail more easily.

His first boat was "Straws", an 8,5m Spirit which he has since sold to finance his new venture. It is a three-quarter ton Charger and has a stainless steel keel and fibreglass and balsa-wood hull. It has been three years in the building.

He hopes to get it in the water by June and courses could start within two months after that.

"A little bit of hardship caused by cold water and seasickness makes it all worth talking about in the bar afterwards," he said.

The first fund-raiser for his project will be held on Saturday, March 24, when Medite Shipping is holding a "Great Paint" for this and a number of other charity causes.

The group is putting up new R18m headquarters at the corner of Victoria Embankment and Winder Street and before the demolishers start they have invited 100 art students from Technikon Natal to paint the two massive sides of the old building which is still standing on the site.

With the aid of scaffolding and many tins of paint, they will be painting large murals and the theme will be the sea to highlight the need to conserve this precious resource.