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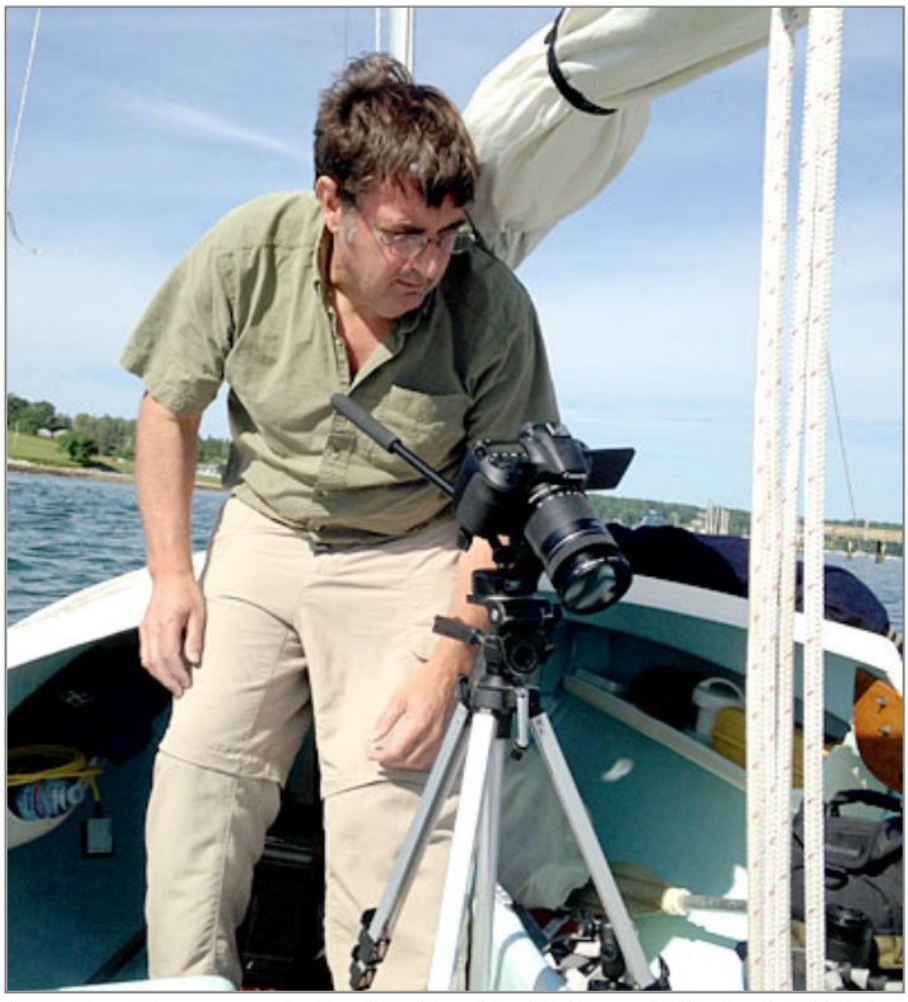
'Looking for a Hero' - Bristol Man to Screen Documentary on Rescue

By Haley Bascom



Russ Lane films a scene for "Looking for a Hero" in Pemaquid Harbor in 2015. The short film documents his father's role in the rescue of five people from a sinking sailboat during a hurricane in 1958. (Photo courtesy Russ Lane)

A hero was born when Russell A. Lane saved the lives of five young people from a sinking sailboat in Penobscot Bay. At least, that's what the headlines would have read today. But back in 1958, Lane's heroism went largely unnoticed - until now.

Lane's son, Russell "Russ" Lane Jr., set out last year to unearth the details behind what his parents always referred to as another day on the job. As a lighthouse keeper at the Whitehead Light Station on Whitehead Island, his father said his act was what "anyone would have done."

"He never gave himself a lot of credit," said Russ.

Russ found his notoriously humble father had downplayed the dangerous rescue mission that took place Aug. 19, 1958 during the Category 5 Hurricane Cleo. He became inspired.

"I just knew Dad was a hero," the documentary starts. "Now all had to do was prove it to him." Russ spent over a year researching and making the 20-minute documentary.

Curiosity-fueled research turned into a full-time investigation. Russ didn't have much to start with as only one article mentioned the rescue in 1958, and many details mentioned in the Rockland Courier-Gazette piece were inaccurate.

"Some of the teenagers' names were misspelled and they didn't mention my mom's role at all," Russ said.

Russ traveled across the country, tracking down people involved that day and collecting details on the event that occurred 58 years ago.



Russell A. Lane with son Russell "Russ" Lane Jr. in 2014. Now 84 years old, Lane Sr. lives in Bristol with his wife, Sandra Lane. (Photo courtesy Russ Lane)

Russell A. Lane and wife Sandra Lane had just moved to Whitehead Island a few months prior with their infant daughter, Becky. When the hurricane hit in August 1958, they had only recently acquired a boat. Before that they were at the mercy of a passing lobsterman for rides to shore.

Russ's parents always stressed how much work it takes to maintain a lighthouse such as Whitehead Light. "Everyone thinks of it as a wonderful life, as romantic, but it's not like that," said Russ.

The afternoon of Tuesday, Aug. 19, 1958 Sandra Lane was picking berries when she noticed a sailboat in the water during the storm, according to the film. With winds reported at 20-40 mph earlier that day, she decided to keep watch on the boat.

Unknown to her, The Debby held four teenage summer campers and one camp counselor who had just lost their bail. They were left with a sponge and their hands to bail out the hurricane waves. It wasn't enough. Soon the five sailors, aged 14-20, were in the water, holding onto the sinking sailboat. All but one life jacket had floated away. One of the girls, Leslie Lewis, started to cry. Her lips were turning blue.

Back on the island, Sandra Lane began to sense something was wrong. She alerted her husband and visiting assistant Alan Calta, who stayed behind to alert U.S. Coast Guard headquarters of needed backup. Lane rushed to his small utility boat, knowing it wasn't large enough to carry more than a few people at one time. Luck would have it that a 16-year-old David Gamage was nearby with his grandfather's lobster boat, and the two set off to rescue the teens.

Having been in the water for close to an hour, the teens felt a flood of relief with the sight of the approaching lobster boat.

It wasn't easy pulling the teenagers onto the lobster boat in the rough waves, but Lane and Gamage managed. Once ashore, Sandra Lane took over. She wrapped them in blankets and led Leslie Lewis and Susan Cleever into her room, where she opened her own dresser drawers and said, "Take what you need." Meanwhile, Lane and Gamage had turned back to sea to recover The Debby.

All five former teens said they would have died if it weren't for the Lanes and Gamage. By the time the backup Coast Guard boat arrived, The Debby and all its occupants were safely ashore.

The film documents an emotional reunion between the shipmates and their rescuers 57 years later.

Even after 25-plus viewings as the film progressed, Russ's father remains humble.

"He is not convinced any more now that he is a hero than when I started," said Russ. His father still asserts that anyone in his situation would have reacted the same. However, his father and mother both are known to "shed a few tears" with each viewing, according to their son.

Russ recently entered the documentary in a couple film festivals throughout the state and even began writing a book about his investigative journey. He is still searching for one camper, Leslie Lewis.

"Looking for a Hero" will premiere Thursday, May 26 at 7 p.m. at the Lighthouse Learning Center at Pemaquid Point Lighthouse Park, 3115 Bristol Road. Admission is free.