

*May 27, 2016 Interview with Captain Rosario Fernandez Rodriguez of tall ship El Galeón written by Elizabeth Lorayne.*

There was magic in the air that morning of Friday, May 27th. Not only was the 17th century Spanish tall ship replica, El Galeón, in Newburyport's harbor, but I was scheduled to meet the captain, the only female captain of a tall ship in the world. The synchronicity of this opportunity left me feeling giddy as I walked the enlivened streets of Newburyport to the ship. This special meeting was arranged by the Newburyport Custom House Maritime Museum because of my children's picture book, The Adventures of Piratess Tilly. Piratess Tilly is the captain of her own ship and leads her crew on naturalist expeditions. It felt all too pertinent that I give a copy of the book to a real female captain.

Boarding El Galeón, walking topside, past the hundreds of salt water infused lines, and simultaneously ducking while stepping over the lip of the doorway; immediately sent me back to my formative years sailing and boating 60 miles northeast of Seattle, WA in the San Juan Islands. Upon meeting Captain Rosario Fernandez Rodriguez, I immediately felt a kinship, while her gracious confidence reminded me of my task at hand.

Once seated on the wooden benches in the galley, I presented her with my book. Her eyes lit up at the cover showing young Piratess Tilly at the helm of her own tall ship. Rosario immediately related to the many purposes of the book. She loved the poetry and the art, but mostly she loved the girl-empowerment and the educational features of Piratess Tilly and her crew's life aboard the ship.

Tucked inside the book I had a few questions I hoped Rosario would be willing to answer. Little did I know we would speak for the next two hours, discussing her own childhood sailing and some of her experiences becoming a female captain.

*Was there a specific moment from your childhood that contributed directly to your desire to work on and eventually captain a tall ship?*

Rosario grew up in Arcos de la Frontera, Spain, where her family lived some 300ft from a lake. It was on this lake that her passion for sailing was born. When Rosario was a child, her father and his friends often sailed a 420 sailboat, "I remember being seated on to the top of the box for the keel and I remember perfectly the color of the hull, and also the shape of the sail completely, full of wind. I remember that I liked it a lot." From that formative moment she seized the opportunity to sail her father's friends windsurfing board. She didn't know how to sail, but she persevered and managed to sail across the lake. When she reached the other side, she didn't know how to return against the wind, so she paddled atop the board! From that moment she knew she needed to learn how to sail properly.

Her father took his own passion for sailing and worked to build a sailing club, the Arcos Sailing Club. Rosario explained that because Arcos de la Frontera is 70 miles from the coast, it took some time to show the local community and councilmen the advantages of sailing as a sport. Her father was determined and after receiving several donated 420 sailboats from clubs on the coast, his own sailing club took flight. Pride overflowed her eyes as she told me about the hours she spent helping him repair the boats in preparation for their club. A few years later, when she was 13, in conjunction with a club on the coast, they were ready to offer sailing lessons. Rosario quickly decided she wanted to become a certified sailing instructor, which she accomplished a few years later.

*When did you decide to become a captain?*

While attending courses in art history at university, Rosario spent every free moment teaching. Once she finished school, she quickly realized she was truly happiest on the water. She then decided to make sailing her way of living, saying she, “wanted to have my own ship, I want to charter my own ship, I want to become a captain of my ship, but I didn’t think of being a captain of a tall ship at that moment,” laughing with amusement at the major role she eventually attained.

*What are your favorite aspects to both working on and captaining a tall ship?*

When meeting and spending time with Rosario it is not hard to see how seriously she takes her role as captain, from how she oversees her crew, expecting them to always be maintaining the ship and learning, to her own willingness to learn, “I like that I am all of the time teaching, I like that, but also I am all the time learning. And also I get to know many many different places and many different people. It’s also a way of knowing myself or trying to know myself and I try also to learn about everything to be a better person and captain. I try.”

*What would you say to young girls who have big dreams and goals?*

With the girl-empowerment aspect of The Adventures of Piratess Tilly, I was curious to hear what this real life female captain would say to young girls, “Everything is possible if you work towards it. I mean, if you work, focusing, you can get it, you can get it.” Rosario explained to me some of the hardships she’d experienced as a woman trying to become a captain. She often faced disbelief by boat owners, who would instead offer her jobs as a stewardess. Her perseverance and patience endured and she went from captaining a dredger ship to captaining the Nao Victoria and El Galeón. Even as our time together was coming to end, it was clear to me how important this question was to Rosario as she came back to it saying, “If you work hard, if you focus on what you want and if you are full of what you want, you can do it. And if someone wants to restrict you, just try to smile and look to the other side and go the other way. Take the other door - the other paths - there are many, many paths. Just try another one.”

*Elizabeth Lorayne is the author of the award-winning children’s picture book, The Adventures of Piratess Tilly. A native Seattleite, she feels most at home near water, which makes living in Newburyport, MA most appropriate. She is an artist and writer, who enjoys hiking and creating art with her family. You can contact her by email [ElizabethLorayne@gmail.com](mailto:ElizabethLorayne@gmail.com) or through her books website [PiratessTilly.com](http://PiratessTilly.com) The sequel to The Adventures of Piratess Tilly, taking place on Easter Island, is due out this September.*