

Sailing Toward Resilience: Proving the Life-Changing Impact of the SHK Scallywag Programme

When the Sun Hung Kai Scallywag Foundation was established in 2019, it was built on a simple yet powerful belief: that sailing could change young lives. Seven years on, after delivering 475 training sessions to 3,197 young sailors on the water, the programme's profound impact caught the attention of a researcher at The Chinese University of Hong Kong (CUHK), leading to a rigorous, first-of-its-kind study.

This is the story of how a grassroots community initiative was ultimately validated by clinical science. It is told through the people who lived it: **Myrian Fan**, the CUHK scholar who conducted the research; **Kay Rawbone BEM**, Co-Founder of Sailability Hong Kong, who runs the programme; and **Tommy Wong**, a teenager with special educational needs (SEN) who joined the programme, went on to represent the national sailing team, and now is coaching and developing the future generations of sailor under various programmes including the SailaaVX One Serendipity Programme and Royal Hong Kong Yacht Club (RHKYC) Sharks Racing Team.

Out of Sai Kung, a fleet of small dinghies noses into the water with young sailors at the helm. Some of these children live with physical or learning difficulties, while others come from underprivileged backgrounds. Yet on the open water, those barriers dissolve. Everyone is equal, focused entirely on the immediate task: a boat, a breeze, and a job to do.

For years, instructors and volunteers watched this transformation unfold on the docks. They watched the children building confidence and resilience, while developing the discipline, teamwork, and emotional calmness needed to navigate the water. Children who found traditional classrooms overwhelming suddenly settled into a quiet, singular focus at the tiller. It was a profound, life-changing shift – one that was obvious to those watching from the shore, but had yet to be formally proven to the wider world.

Beyond the Clinic: How a Mother and Nurse Proved the Healing Power of Sailing

Myrian Fan came to the programme wearing several hats at once: registered nurse, former nursing lecturer, mother of an autistic child, and PhD researcher at CUHK's Nethersole School of Nursing.

"As a nurse, I have always believed that healing doesn't only happen in clinical settings," she said. "When I first encountered this sailing programme, I saw a community already doing extraordinary things for autistic children: building a deep sense of belonging, confidence, and social connection, but the academic research had not yet caught up with it. As a mother, I felt this on a deeply personal level. I wanted to build the scientific evidence to prove what this community has always believed in."

Her first study, published in the *Journal of Adventure Education and Outdoor Learning* in early 2025, gathered the experiences of people connected to the programme, including autistic children, caregivers, and the instructors and volunteers who run the sessions. The findings mapped the children's growth against the PERMA model of wellbeing, which measures positive emotions, engagement, relationships, meaning, and accomplishment.

The study revealed a critical insight: while children visibly flourished on the water, they viewed the sessions purely as recreation, leaving their growing resilience invisible to them. To ensure these benefits extended beyond the boat, the intervention was redesigned to make resilience-building explicit. By transforming it into a nurse-led programme with structured reflection woven into the sailing itself, children learned to actively recognize and name skills like staying calm under pressure, allowing them to successfully carry those tools ashore to their schools and homes.

Proven Impact: Turning Ocean Adventures into Long-Term Improvements

The research is grounded in a gold-standard RCT with 184 autistic children. Yet behind the data are stories of courage, wind, saltwater – and BELIEF. By tracking autistic children aged 7 to 12 from Hong Kong's inclusive education schools across a 24-hour sailing programme – delivered over six days in four one-hour sessions daily – this study, validated by an expert panel spanning nursing, academia, and qualified sailing instruction, proved that ocean-based intervention delivers distinct therapeutic benefits compared to a crafting control group. The approach was incredibly well-received, achieving an exceptional 94.4% family retention rate with no adverse event. Early findings already show a remarkably large, positive impact on the children's resilience, providing a robust clinical foundation for the next phase of research.

Building on these strong initial results, an upcoming full-scale study will track children for up to nine months to measure long-term improvements in their self-esteem, social functioning, and overall quality of life. The ultimate goal is to answer the question that matters most to every parent: does the confidence and calmness a child discovers out on the water stay with them long after they return to land?

The work is already drawing international attention. Myrian has presented her findings in Singapore, Hong Kong and Toronto. Her research, titled "*Beyond Clinical Walls: Sailing Toward Resilience*," earned her 1st Runner-up at the CUHK 3-Minute Thesis Competition in 2026. Her academic excellence has been widely recognized, earning her the Sigma Nursing Leadership Education Grant 2026, the HKAUW Postgraduate Scholarship, and CUHK's Outstanding Academic Award for MPhil-PhD in Nursing and the New Researcher Award (Postgraduate).



“What moves me most is being able to stand on an international stage and thank the people who made this possible: the Sailability instructors, the volunteers, Kay, the private donors, and the Sun Hung Kai Scallywag

Foundation,” she said. “Without their support, this work would have never left the community and entered the scientific record.”

The Partnership Making Sailing Accessible to All

None of this research would exist without a programme worth studying. Kay Rawbone BEM, Co-Founder of Sailability Hong Kong, has been running the SHK Scallywag Programme since August 2019, when the organization first partnered with the Sun Hung Kai Scallywag Foundation.

“Sailing is inherently therapeutic, that is something I have believed since we started Sailability in 2009,” Kay said. “What Myrian has done is giving that belief a scientific language. That matters enormously, both for the families we work with and for the future of the programme. When you can walk into a room and say we have empirical data proving this works, it changes the conversation. It opens doors.”

While sailing is traditionally viewed as an exclusive sport for the wealthy, Sailability – with the vital support of donors and SHK & Co. – is dedicated to making it accessible to everyone. The programme welcomes participants from underrepresented parts of the community, irrespective of ability, ethnicity, gender, or socioeconomic status. The pathway itself is deliberately simple: an initial taster day introduces the children to the water, followed by five dedicated days of sail training.

“What you see on the water is truly remarkable,” Kay said. “Children who might struggle with loud environments or unpredictable social settings find something on a boat that they cannot find elsewhere: a clear task, a defined role, and a sense of team. They rise to the challenge every time.”



Trusting the Water: How Sailing Gave One Young Man a Future

If academic research measures what this programme can achieve over six weeks, Tommy Wong demonstrates what it can do over seven years. In mid 2019, Tommy was a secondary school student with ADHD, struggling with the standard education system and feeling perplexed about his future. His trajectory completely changed when he entered the sailing pathway programme established by the SHK Scallywag Foundation and Sailability Hong Kong, an initiative designed to open the sport to young people who might otherwise never have the opportunity to step onto a boat.

Learning to sail in accessible Hansa dinghies, Tommy quickly discovered a natural talent. Within just two years, he was selected for Hong Kong’s

national squad, placing third overall in his first major event and earning the title of Scallywag Sailor of the Year. He went on to compete across Asia and Europe, training as a scholarship athlete at the Hong Kong Sports Institute. Today, Tommy’s journey has come full circle. Sidelined from the ILCA class due to injuries, he was qualified as a Royal Yacht Association sailing instructor last year and actively coaches racing programmes. Alongside volunteering to mentor new sailors starting where he once did, he continues to race globally in high-performance classes – primarily in the VX One class with his mentor, Patrick Pender.

“Sailing gave me things I didn’t even know I was missing: calmness, patience, and a true sense of belonging,” Tommy said. “I started as a participant, and now I am giving back as a coach. That journey was made possible by the incredible support system around me – Kay, my mentors, the SHK Scallywag Foundation, and SHK & Co. When I teach now, I feel a deep responsibility not just to the kids, but to the families standing behind them. To anyone just starting out, my advice is simple: trust the process, build the discipline, and trust Mother Nature. It will give you far more than you expected.”



Endure, Adapt, Excel: Why the Future of Sailing Matters

SHK & Co. has been a long-standing supporter of the Hong Kong sailing community. Through title sponsorships of major events like Hong Kong Dragon World Championship, Hong Kong Race Week, the Around the Island Race, and the Open Dinghy Regatta, alongside its support of Sailability Hong Kong’s free, inclusive sailing courses, the firm has played a key role in nurturing future sailors, elevating Hong Kong’s presence on the global stage, and building one of Asia’s most vibrant sailing communities.

At the heart of this support is a deep belief in the transformative power of the sport. By bridging elite competitive sailing with grassroots community impact, the firm continues to champion resilience both on and off the water.

“Sailing is a core part of SHK & Co.’s identity, embodying our ethos: ‘Endure. Adapt. Excel.’ from our Scallywag Racing Team’s achievements to our support for the sport locally,” said **Tony Edwards, Deputy CEO of SHK & Co.** “What Myrian, Kay, Tommy, and this entire community have achieved together is something we are genuinely proud to have played a part in enabling. Now, with emerging scientific evidence proving that the therapeutic impact of sailing is measurable, replicable, and deeply significant, our commitment to this life-changing work is stronger than ever for the long term.”

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Sailability Hong Kong’s programmes aim to provide sailing opportunities to EVERYONE in Hong Kong. For more information, visit www.sailability.org.hk.