



Setting sail: Laura Harkins, 15, with dad Peter on Sail NZ America's Cup yacht NZL40/41.

In control, left: Laura Harkins, 15, from Whitford, who has down syndrome, had a wish granted with the Southern Stars Grant-A-Wish programme, to sail on an America's Cup yacht.

Photos: FIONA GOODALL

Captain Harkins takes the helm

By KRISTINA RAPLEY

Sailing the harbour with clear skies and beautiful sun isn't a bad way to spend the afternoon.

Laura Harkins from Whitford got to do just that recently thanks to Sail NZ and Southern Stars Charitable Trust.

The 15-year-old has down syndrome and attends the

Pegasus Unit at Pakuranga College. She had a wish granted by the Southern Stars Grant-A-Wish programme, which gives children with ongoing medical conditions, terminal illnesses and other life-changing conditions the chance to realise their dreams.

Laura and her father Peter were invited to spend an afternoon sailing on

America's Cup yacht NZL40/41. They were picked up in a luxury chauffeured car, and dropped off at Auckland's Viaduct Harbour.

They set sail with the Sail NZ skippers on Waitemata Harbour, and Laura was put to work. She became one of the crew, taking the helm and putting her muscles to use on the grinders.

"It was awesome," she says.

Mr Harkins says Laura is quite adventurous, so the experience was great for her. "People with disabilities can go out and do anything really, all they need is a bit of support."

He says they have their fair share of difficult days, "so Laura getting to do something fun and exciting is great for the whole family".

"It will be a good story for

her to share with her friends at school that's for sure."

The New Zealand Down Syndrome Association works together with Southern Stars Charitable Trust.

It raises funds for projects like the Grant-A-Wish programme, and other initiatives to support people with down syndrome and their families.

Martin Mahler from Southern Stars says this was the

first wish granted this year.

They were happy to provide an exciting day for Laura, who had a huge smile on her face for most of the afternoon.

"The overall goal of Laura's wish has been to make her happy by providing her with a great experience, as well as to promote positive attitudes about down syndrome in the wider community," Mr Mahler says.

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