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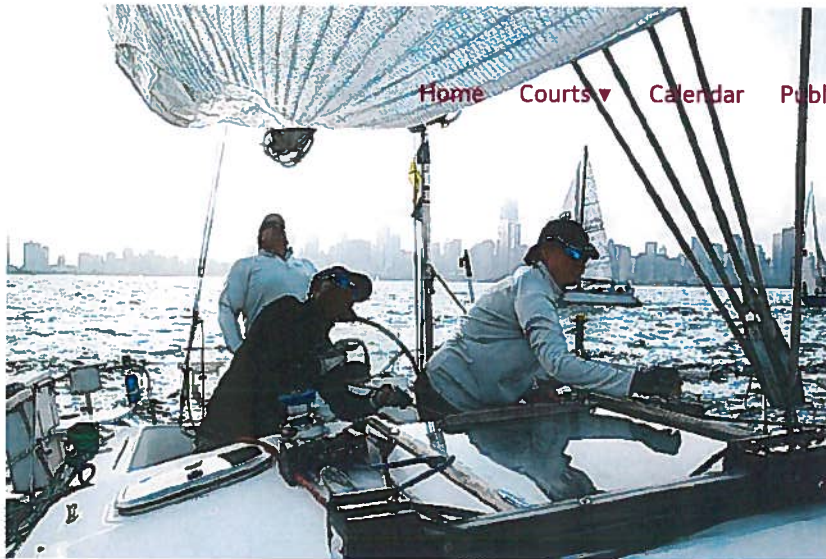


Photo was provided by Karen K. Harris.

Karen K. Harris (right), a partner at Arnstein & Lehr LLP, and her Jackson Park Yacht Club teammates set out on a 333-mile race from Navy Pier to Mackinac Island, Mich., on July 22. Their sailboat, a 38-footer named the *Mise en Place*, was one of 326 boats participating.

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Arnstein & Lehr partner sails stress away

BY EMILY DONOVAN
LAW BULLETIN STAFF WRITER

If you're cruising Lake Shore Drive on a Wednesday evening, you may look out at Lake Michigan to see a partner of one of the country's oldest law firms sailing in what's called a "beer can race."

Karen K. Harris, a partner at Arnstein & Lehr LLP, is vice commodore of the Jackson Park Yacht Club. In July, for her fifth year, she sailed 333 miles up Lake Michigan in the Chicago Yacht Club's Race to Mackinac with one of the race's only predominantly black teams.

For Harris, sailing is how she avoids burnout after long hours of legal practice.

"Being able to get out on the water and being one with nature is my way of recharging, destressing and balancing life," she said.

As a black woman, Harris notices that both the legal practice and sailing are predominantly white. When her team placed fifth in its division in 2012, she said she was the first black woman to be on the champion's

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podium since the contest to reach Mackinac Island, Mich., was founded in 1898.

She said she was proud and hoped her accomplishment as the first black woman on the podium would encourage a second and third to follow.

Eight of the nine sailors on Harris' Mac Race yacht were black, including fellow attorney David A. Shelton.

The Mac Race is "no luxury cruise," said Shelton, a sports and entertainment solo practitioner who lives on his sailboat. It's an endurance race, sailing to the island between Michigan's upper and lower peninsulas as fast as the wind allows.

In this year's race, Harris and Shelton's team sailed 67½ hours, straight through the nights, leaving Chicago at 3 p.m. Friday and arriving at Mackinac Island at 10:30 a.m. Monday. They split into three teams of one skipper and two crewmen, sailing in two-hour shifts and sleeping when off duty.

Their vessel, owned by another member of Harris' yacht club, was a 38-foot sailboat named the *Mise en Place*, which gets its name from a French cooking term meaning "everything in its place."

"Theoretically, it would be nice if all equipment were in place," Harris joked.

This year, the *Mise en Place*'s alternator broke, which meant they sailed the old-fashioned way with basically no power. They used flashlights for boat lights, and their refrigerator was out. They knew they needed to go north, but they had to use a handheld, backup GPS device to find their heading. And they could sense a storm was coming in but couldn't use the ship's radar to figure out exactly how or when.

There were a few periods with no wind, and they passed the time swimming off the back of the boat in the middle of the lake.

Harris explained she had to wake up at 3 a.m. to prepare for her 4-to-6 a.m. piloting shift, but at least she was able to appreciate the night sky as the boat cut through the waves. She said more stars are visible from the middle of the lake.

Sailing, Harris said, is such a different environment from her firm's office downtown.

"There are many a days when it's nice outside and I'm sitting inside like, 'Why did I go to law school?'" Harris said.

She can often be seen sitting on the boat with her laptop open, rushing to answer the last few e-mails before she loses cell service. Arnstein & Lehr partners cover for her during the race and until she is back online after she reaches the island.

When not serving clients or working on her firm's diversity efforts, Harris is out on the water three times a week.

She said most yacht clubs, including hers, host intramural "beer can" races on Wednesdays — so named because sailors come back to drink beer with fellow yacht club members.

The Jackson Park Yacht Club also hosts distance races on Saturdays, sailing 30 miles in a triangle or a figure-eight around buoys.

And, on Sundays, Harris will take her own sailboat, a 25-footer named *Amor del Mar* (Love of the Sea in Spanish), out on the water, usually accompanied by friend from outside the yacht club who wants to come

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along for the ride. Her boat came with the name, but Harris liked it — even though it sees more of the lake than the sea.

Meanwhile, Shelton is in the peaceful ambiance of Lake Michigan all the time.

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Because Shelton lives on his sailboat Ascension docked in the Jackson Park Outer Harbor, he does most of his work there, too. He meets clients at an outdoor picnic bench at the Jackson Park Yacht Club and offers to take them on rides around the harbor.

"Clients love to see that image of success," Shelton said of his sailboat. "To see their lawyer on a boat, they love it."

Shelton and Harris, who are both black, also noted there is still a lack of diversity in sailing and said their love for the sport is often met with surprise.

"It's kind of like when Tiger Woods started playing golf," Harris said. "You just don't see it."

In a bathroom reserved for sailors on Mackinac Island this year, Shelton said another man asked him whom he worked for. Later, walking around the island, Shelton said he noticed the few other black people there were working in the service departments.

"One time, somebody actually thought we were stealing a boat," Harris said.

Harris laughed about the incident, noting that someone who doesn't know how to sail could steal a boat or get it out of Lake Michigan to sell it at a boat chop shop (the existence of which she seriously doubted).

Shelton estimated only a handful of the Mac Race's 326 registered boats were owned and crewed by black people.

"Everyone knows us because of that," Shelton said. "We stick out like a sore thumb being black people up there."

The Jackson Park Yacht Club on the South Side is one of the few predominantly black yacht clubs in the country. Harris said being part of the majority made her feel at home.

For a long time, Harris and her brother were the only two black people she knew who sailed. Harris said her mom probably didn't think about race when she signed them up for sailing lessons when Harris was 10 and her brother Joe was 9. The Harris family are biracial, with a dad who is black and mom who is white.

Harris was also one of the only nonwhite sailors during her undergraduate years at Princeton University.

That's why she is so happy her brother is the manager of sailing for the Chicago Park District, running most of the sailing programs in the city. He also teaches an adaptive sailing program for people with disabilities and will run a new sailing program for at-risk youth starting this fall.

Joe Harris said sailing officials have been doing more outreach nationwide to get more people from different backgrounds interested in the sport.

"I think people aren't afraid to knock on the door and say 'Hey, I want to enroll my kid in this class,'" he said. "Whereas, I think 10, for sure 20 years ago, they were a lot more intimidated."

Plus, Karen Harris said, young black kids get to look at her brother as a role model of a successful black person sailing.



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She also said sailing sounds more expensive than it really is. Two weeks of Monday to Friday all-day sailing classes for kids through the Chicago Park District cost \$250 and joining a yacht club like Jackson Park costs about \$350 a year. Plus, making a friend who owns a boat, rather than purchasing one is a way for adults to join a club.

"Sailing and golf have these perceptions of being upper-class, expensive, white sports," she said. "While that may have been true in the past, it's not necessarily the case now."

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