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Family, cadets remember Bill Barnhardt

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Captain Bill Barnhardt stands inside the wheel house of the Gray Fox in April when it was docked at Desmond Landing. / MELISSA WAWZYSKO/TIMES HERALD

Written by Beth LeBlanc Times Herald

It won't be easy to fill Bill Barnhardt's shoes — his daughter Stacey Boyle is sure of that.

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As commanding officer of the sea cadet vessel Grayfox and an honorary dad to many in the community, the Port Huron skipper left a place in the community not easily filled.

"He's going to be missed," Boyle said. "Not just by the family, but by the whole sea cadet community and by everyone here."

The Kimball Township man died unexpectedly Friday at the age of 72.

He is survived by his wife, Revilla, or "Billy," and daughters Boyle and Kimberly Kendall.

Barnhardt joined the U.S. Naval Sea Cadet Corps in 1990, said

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Henry Nyland, retired navy captain and deputy director for U.S. Naval Sea Cadet Corps.

He was instrumental in the founding of the F.C. Sherman Division — formerly the Blue Water Division — in Port Huron. He also brought the Grayfox, a decommissioned torpedo retriever, to Port Huron in 1997, where he's served as commanding officer since.

"We had a lot of trust in him," Nyland said.

"We appreciated all he did all these years for the sea cadets. It made a real difference."

Barnhardt taught hundreds of Navy Sea Cadets during one- to two-week training stints on the Grayfox, where they'd learn ship handling, navigation, engineering and mess duties. The U.S. Naval Sea Cadet Corps includes youths ages 13 to 17 who participate in leadership and seamanship training.

In 2013 alone, about 300 cadets received instruction from Barnhardt aboard the Grayfox, Nyland said.

"Almost every cadet in the state of Michigan has been on the Grayfox, or trained on the Grayfox, and been taught by Barnhardt in some way," said Lt. Commander Lisa Stoyanovich, a staff member for Region 9-3 in southeastern Michigan.

"It was a real honor when he would let you have the helm in a difficult or tight situation," she said. "He wouldn't take you away from it. He would talk you through it."

Carole Owens, a friend of the Barnhardt family, said Barnhardt's charm went beyond the deck of the Grayfox.

"He was a person who could turn any land lover into a water baby, because he loved the water," Owens said. "But he loved his family more."

Owens grew up calling Barnhardt "Dad Barnhardt."

"His family was everyone who came in contact with him," Owens said. "He would come out fighting if you needed him to. They don't make them like that anymore."

Boyle agreed.

"He never met anybody who wasn't immediately his friend," Boyle said. "I'm glad that we could share him and that people got to see the great man that I have for a father."

Barnhardt's visitation is from 7 to 9 p.m. Monday, and 2 to 4 p.m. and 6 to 9 p.m. Tuesday at the Pollock-Randall Funeral Home. His funeral service is at 11 a.m. Wednesday at Holy Redeemer Lutheran Church, 4475 West Water Street, Port Huron.

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