

Style at lunch

Sailing home

BY RUTH LANDO / PHOTOGRAPHY BY ALEX STAFFORD

If there's anything the bubbly, blond Jan Solomon would like to be known for, it's her radiant smile. Owner of the charter sailing boat Key Breeze, a 41-foot Morgan yacht captained by her husband, Tim, Jan says she wears her smile with pride, although it cost her much pain.

In 1989, while on a Christian mission to Bogota, Colombia with Tim (a minister and now a U.S. Coast Guard Master Captain), their 4-year-old daughter, Lisa, and 1-year-old son, Stephen, Jan was about to play her flute at a stadium concert for evangelist Luis Palau. Someone attempted to kidnap her by drugging her soda, and she hit the ground, face first. In a coma for the next three days, Jan says she only remembers waking up in her husband's arms. She will not discuss what else happened, except to say that she survived.

"I have horrific pain at every moment of every day, even right now," Jan confesses. "On the right side of my face, it feels like someone is taking knives and knifing me up and down. And in my sleep I have weird dreams, like someone is bashing my face against a wall, or that I'm in an accident with a truck. It's been like this for 21 years."

That ordeal left the teacher, author and world traveler with permanent nerve damage, facial paralysis, a brain injury and a life sentence of pain. What it didn't do, however, was destroy her positive spirit or desire to serve others.

"Why do I smile when it hurts?" she asks. "Because I can. Because I'm able to. Because I'm happy. Your style is not what you wear. It's who you are, and mine is definitely my smile."

Jan and Tim Solomon have spent the bulk of their adult lives traveling to 30 countries on six continents. When Tim was opening Christian bookstores, Jan ran short-term mission programs and was also a guidance counselor and Spanish teacher. Starting in 1992, they lived for a year at a time in Indiana, Michigan and Ohio. At Dayton Christian School, Jan was involved with mission trips abroad, while Tim worked in a Peruvian orphanage. Sometimes they took their kids along, to the Dominican Republic to build a clinic and to live among the Waudani Indians in Ecuador.

"Everything was just an adventure," Jan says. "I followed Tim. Something interesting would always pop up for me along the way."

Jan's parents moved from the Midwest to Sarasota when she was 2. While the Hamel and Solomon families were friends, Tim was living with his missionary parents in Argentina, so he and Jan didn't really connect until she was 16. She remembers her childhood as idyllic. Her mother, Jean, played the violin in the Florida West Coast Symphony. Father J.D. Hamel was pastor of First Brethren Church and city police and fire department captain. The bayfront war-memorial park is named for him. It made for a wonderfully diverse

upbringing: Jan's mother's black dresses and pearls and her dad's exciting emergencies and crisis interventions.

Jan and Tim finished high school together in Sarasota and married in 1977. Jan earned a bachelor's degree in education from USF, followed by a master's of education in curriculum writing from Ashland University. She began her doctorate in cross-cultural studies at The Ohio State University and participated in a University of Alabama graduate program during her time in Columbus. But teaching became too difficult for Jan after her injuries. Several times during a typical conversation, she will lose her place when her brain "short circuits."

"After 21 years, I've learned to understand it. ... My brain just shuts off, like a computer going off. All day long," she adds. "I loved teaching school and I was very intimate with my kids. But they could tell. The high-school kids, especially. They would ask me, just like my children do: 'Are you on or off, Mrs. Solomon? Go plug in.'" Jan's self-deprecating solution is to deflect the situation with jokes about blondes or menopause.

There is one place where she is truly comfortable, however: aboard the Key Breeze. She and Tim have been sailing Sarasota's waters together since they were teens. Now their life has come full circle with the creation of Key Sailing charters three and a half years ago. More than just a business, it is Jan's sanctuary, and she loves when customers feel that way, too.

The sailing vessel can hold 12, but the Solomons only book six passengers at a time, "so



Jan Hamel Solomon

it's your own private tour," says Jan. "I'm not selling a boat ride. I often give away cruises and donate my tips to charity." Just like the song from "Cheers," Jan believes, "It's like sometimes you want to go where everybody knows your name and you feel safe."

She never sails without chocolates aboard and would like to have her own line of private-label confections someday.

"The boat is delightful," Jan says. "I go down into the living quarters and it's like a two-bedroom, two-bath condo. I return calls, and when I come back up the sun is shining. And the sun is excellent for my face. I figure everyone has something. ... The more people are out on the boat, the more I realize that it's true — I just realize that my brain is busted and that's just the way it is."

She and Tim have entertained movie stars and families from Windsor Castle, including the Queen's art director and riding partner. The movie "Deadly Closure" was filmed on the Key Breeze, and everyone helps spread the word. It's a winning formula. The Solomons have already served 10,000 passengers, logging 20,000 miles in just under four years. Jan was named the 2009 Siesta Key Chamber of Commerce Business Person of the Year and recently was cited by the

Sarasota Chamber of Commerce for "Woman Entrepreneurial Excellence." Key Breeze is also the official educational sailing vessel for Sarasota County, and Jan has begun taking school children out on the boat for free.

"This year I will offer to do free talks at the schools to tell girls they can do anything they want to do," she adds enthusiastically.

The boat is a family affair, including both children and Tim, as Jan celebrates 50 summers in Sarasota and 33 years of marriage. "It's really and truly a very nice love story," she notes. "And people like it because it's true. We still like each other well enough that we still want to hang out on a boat together." What has made it work for the couple? "Give faith a fighting chance," Jan states. "Stay best friends."

Son Stephen, an accomplished musician like his mother, sings for passengers. Unfortunately, Jan can't play the flute anymore because of her jaw injury. But she's thinking of performing "God Bless America" at the Veteran's Day program at J.D. Hamel Park this year, the 50th year that her family has been in charge of the prayers and the program.

After writing mission publications and co-authoring religious books, Jan has embarked on her most personal narrative, "Sailing Home." She summarizes the tale. "I wanted to write this particular book because it's my story. It's the story of a little girl from a perfect home town (you couldn't make up a town like this) who goes off to change the world, very idealistic and young, raised in the '70s, while her parents did missionary work. We had this feeling that we wanted to go off and help, so we chose the poor in Colombia and left four grandparents and a huge support system and a great church and a town I had gone to school in, from pre-school to undergraduate. The little girl doesn't change the world; it beats her up. Then she comes back home and buys a little boat and the whole world comes out on her boat, and then I get to tell the stories of all these amazing people."

"Sailing Home" is the book that really defines Jan's thoughts, and follows "Life's a Breeze" and "Love's a Breeze," short stories she gathered on the boat. She is also working on a screenplay and hopes to see her book become a movie, for her children and grandchild. "When we want to relax, build a memory, shut our eyes, to truly, truly be ourselves and find ourselves, we head for a beach and a boat, and a memory of fresh air, fine chocolates and a few hours of peace on earth," she says passionately. "... life, liberty and the pursuit of clean water against white sand..."

What we ate: Marina Jack
What we did: The perfect combo
of breakfast and dessert. Jan —
Waffle with bacon and fruit and
her favorite cheesecake. Me — Egg
croissant with ham and cheese and
panna cotta.