

BOAT LAUNCH, 3.0

by Andrea Milam

Winds thundered across the landscape, whipping up the sea and tossing boats, cars, and large sections of people's homes through the air with the ease of a toddler throwing his toys mid-tantrum. *Kekoa*, a 50-foot wooden catamaran, was tied down in St. John's Hurricane Hole alongside more than 100 other Virgin Islands vessels in preparation for a direct hit by powerful Hurricane Irma. Slowly, one by one, *Kekoa* broke free of the 15 three-quarter-inch lines with 75 feet of three-eighths-inch chain per line anchoring her to the ocean floor, and then edged herself toward the shore-

storm, when many St. John residents were still shell-shocked and putting all their energy into securing food, water, and shelter. Ryan and Jamison took to the water. Just ten minutes after the boat-launch ramp in the island's main town of Cruz Bay was cleared, the brothers set out by dinghy to learn the fate of the wooden catamaran that they'd built by hand and then rescued and restored after she was abandoned at sea. It was a long, quiet ride along the island's north shore, where the brothers took in what they described as a "nuclear blast site." As they finally approached Hurricane Hole, they realized anxiously that they didn't see *Kekoa's* mast sticking up over the hill where it should have been.

"In the first bay, you could see catamarans thrown up into the woods and

NIKO DELLIOS



TOMMY GIBNEY

line. The sleek gray vessel had been here before, alone at sea in a terrible storm. She knew how to take care of herself. *Kekoa* crawled up on the shoreline, narrowly missing several large boulders and a pileup of wrecked boats that would have torn her body apart, and came to rest where she awaited discovery by her builders, brothers Ryan and Jamison Witbeck.

Like many other St. John residents, the Witbecks spent the days leading up to Hurricane Irma's arrival fretting and tirelessly doing all they could to protect themselves and their property. They had built *Kekoa* by hand a decade ago, and then nearly lost her at sea during her delivery from South Carolina to the Virgin Islands, when the delivery crew abandoned her off the US East Coast during a storm. *Kekoa* spent six days alone at sea, sailing herself 168 miles back toward the coast, before she was finally found and restored by the Witbeck brothers. With the worst behind her, *Kekoa* enjoyed days at sea with 6,000 guests annually, who were tantalized by her sleek beauty and trademark black sails, her harrowing tale, and the love her builders had for her. And then September 2017 arrived, and a wave came off Africa that had many Caribbean residents watching, waiting, and worrying.

Ryan, who lives in the mainland US with his family, was planning to join his brother Jamison on St. John on September 12th, 2017 for *Kekoa's* annual haul-out, but the August 27th departure from Africa of the weather system that would become Hurricane Irma caught the boatbuilder's attention.

"We both concluded it didn't look good and I should probably just be there," Ryan recalls. "We hoped it would just be a fire drill, but all indicators were showing it could become something massive. It was a super-scary scenario."

Ryan hit the ground running, teaming up with Jamison to protect their beloved catamaran in every way possible. They brought her to Hurricane Hole, the most protected stretch of shoreline on St. John, where more than 100 other vessels tucked into the area's sheltered bays in anticipation of the rapidly intensifying Irma. The brothers tied up their most precious creation with every bit of line and chain they owned, and helped secure some of their neighbors' boats as well before turning their thoughts to preparing for their own safety.

"In a state of total exhaustion we just looked at each other and said, 'We've done everything we can do,'" says Jamison.

They woke up on September 6th to breezes that became gusts that became howling winds that peaked in an indescribable force. Ryan and Jamison barricaded themselves in their home's concrete bathroom, the door screwed shut with extra wood enforcements, power tools at the ready to cut themselves out after the storm if need be.

"It felt like an earthquake, a hurricane, and a tornado combined," Ryan says. "The whole cement structure was wobbling. We were shoulder to shoulder on the floor of the bathroom, and sure enough the roof went tearing off. We both got really quiet."

Even as they focused on their own survival, their beloved *Kekoa* was never far from their minds. The brothers knew that what they were experiencing inside was nothing compared to what their boat was being subjected to outside. Two days after the

Hurricane Irma blew the catamaran *Kekoa* and other yachts ashore in St. John, USVI's ordinarily well-named Hurricane Hole

Jamison (left) and Ryan inspecting damage to *Kekoa* at Hansen Bay

piled up in the back of the bay," Ryan recalls of those heart-pounding moments. "Both of us just took a deep breath and said, 'Okay, it's really bad. No one made it.'"

As they rounded the corner to the bay where they had left *Kekoa* tightly strapped down, it took several moments to register what they were even seeing.

"It looked like she'd driven so far up on land between the trees," Ryan says. "She was at such a severe angle we couldn't even tell what we were looking at."

The brothers pulled the dinghy up onto the shoreline and crawled over trees and boat parts so mangled it was hard to tell one from the other. They circled their treasured *Kekoa*, taking stock of the damage and shouting out to one another every gash, break, and tear they came upon. A mast snapped in three pieces. Twisted, broken railings. Small fractures here and there.

"Then we came up on her port side and saw a 12-foot gaping hole from the head to the engine room, and we just started saying, 'Oh no, she's broken,'" Ryan says.

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“For a moment it looked like a total loss, like she’d broken her back.”

Less than an hour after they’d arrived to survey the scene, the brothers had to leave. It was all too much to take in. Ryan and Jamison admit to hoping that *Kekoa* would beat the odds and survive the strongest Atlantic storm on record. After all, she had survived being abandoned at sea; why couldn’t her perseverance carry through to this disaster, offering some form of hope to an island that was so traumatized, so battered?



COURTESY OF KEKOA

Above: Silver Cloud towing the patched-up catamaran toward Hansen Bay

Below: Ryan and Jamison working to liberate Kekoa from the mangled mangroves



“There was a real moment where we felt like we let everybody down,” Ryan says.

Through her initial construction, her rescue and restoration, and her subsequent sublime days at sea, *Kekoa* had become a member of the Witbeck family. The brothers speak of her as though she’s their daughter, and their description of how they felt leaving her broken and battered on the shoreline is heartbreaking.

“The night after we pulled out of the bay was harder than seeing her for the first time,” Ryan recalls. “Jamison has done an amazing job running everything so well and taking such good care of her, and driving away from her that day, looking over our shoulders at the wreckage, it was like seeing her in her graveyard. It was like leaving our injured child in the woods with wolves circling. ‘Oh my god, she’s just out there.’”

The brothers acted fast, eager to bring *Kekoa* back to life. There was never a question of whether she would be deemed a total loss. Ryan and Jamison had brought

her back before, and they knew they would do whatever it takes to get her ready to launch for a third time. The process began with clearing away the 16-foot by 30-foot area between *Kekoa*’s two hulls, which was jam packed with tiny sticks and segments of branches.

“We were digging like dogs, and it took many days to get that area under the boat clear,” says Jamison. “The morale was low.”

Finally, the area between the hulls was clear. The brothers patched up *Kekoa*’s holes, coated the plywood patches with epoxy, and then jacked her up in preparation to float

her for the first time. *Silver Cloud*, an iconic St. John sailing vessel, came to the rescue. The boat’s owner, Elliott Hooper, towed *Kekoa* back into the sea and headed east toward Hansen Bay, a pretty, picturesque stretch of sand on the island’s east end.

“When *Silver Cloud* pulled us off the beach, *Kekoa* floated, and there was this sense of relief and pride,” says Ryan. “It was like, ‘Okay, she’s a boat again.’”

Water seeped into sections of the hull the brothers hadn’t realized were compromised, and Ryan and Jamison spent the hour-long trip surveying, bailing water, and looking over their precious girl as she was towed to safety.

Hansen Bay is accessed from land via private property, and the owners of that property were initially not happy about watching *Kekoa* limp up onto the shoreline. The brothers knew that the magnitude of devastation in the area could mean many months before they might get into a boatyard, and who could better repair *Kekoa* than the men who built her? With much of the island protected by the National Park, however, finding a place to work on *Kekoa* was not easy.

“We need your help,” the brothers pleaded to the Hansen Bay property owners. “*Kekoa* is not just a boat. It’s our heart and soul.”

Ryan and Jamison breathed a huge sigh of relief as they were granted permission to work on their boat on the beach, and they immediately set to work, spending long, grueling days in the Caribbean sun bringing their girl back to life. Before reconstruction came the demo phase, when the brothers cut away fractured areas. They emptied bilges, inspected every inch of the boat for standing water, and constructed a makeshift shed to protect themselves from the record-setting rains that continued to fall for weeks following Irma. Ryan and Jamison plan to complete the woodworking on St. John before getting into a boatyard for painting, welding of new railings, and possibly replacing *Kekoa*’s engine with an electric motor. With the help of those who continue to contribute to *Kekoa*’s YouCaring fundraising initiative, the brothers are ready, yet again, to pour their blood, sweat, and tears into their prized wooden boat, as they prepare to launch her for a third time to the delight of all who have fallen in love with her story.

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