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ROW2K MOVIE REVIEW

'A Hero for Daisy' - Chris Ernst Rocks the Boat

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For years, it seemed, men held the monopoly on the widely available heroes in the sport of rowing. Legions of shaven-headed, tattooed freshman heavyweights could find heroic rowing ideals and tales of seatracing and manly grunting in the works of David Halberstam, Steven Kiesling and Brad Lewis, to name a few. And while one could argue that grunting is an attribute of rowers of either gender, and that stories of perseverance and racing prowess offer lessons to anybody who chooses to read them, the fact remains that, up until now, no one has offered a well-told tale of one of the many female heroes in rowing.

But luckily, rowing tales don't dull significantly with age, and in the fall of last year ex-Olympian and filmmaker Mary Mazzio and her co-producers reintroduced us to world champion rower and curmudgeon Chris Ernst in the documentary film "A Hero for Daisy."



For the as-yet uninitiated, and those who only know the phrase "Title IX" from the bows of boats christened by the oodles of newly-minted women's Varsity rowing programs, "A Hero for Daisy" recounts the rowing career of Chris Ernst, Yale oarswoman, two-time Olympian, world champion and plumber who is perhaps best known for leading the first highly-visible demonstration for equal athletic facilities for women, calling on the federal mandate known as "Title IX."

In 1976, angered by inequality in the rowing facilities at Yale, Ernst led 19 of her Yale teammates in a simple but effective protest: the women marched into the office of the Yale women's athletic director, stripped to the waist to reveal backs and chests bearing the phrase "Title IX." As a stringer for the "New York Times" snapped pictures

and recorded the event, Ernst read a 300-word statement expressing the rowers' outrage at being treated as inferiors to the men's team.

The "incident," as the episode is referred to by numerous people in the film, received national attention and resulted in the construction of showers for the Yale women's crew, and on a larger scale directed national attention to fiscal and physical realities of women's athletics. It is this incident that serves as the linchpin on which Mazzio's film turns.

But while Ernst's accomplishment at Yale alone are worth noting, "A Hero for Daisy" also traces Ernst's career as a national team rower, Olympian, and world-champion in the lightweight women's double sculls at the 1986 World Championships. By turns hilarious, poignant and duly serious, "A Hero for Daisy" shows Ernst making plenty of waves along the way as an uncompromising and outspoken competitor, in every sense of the word. Still photos from the period and modern footage of Ernst rowing and working in Boston today serve as the backdrop for the narrative as it moves between interviews. For the interviews Mazzio assembled, along with a reluctant Ernst, a well-rounded ensemble from Ernst's family, former teammates and Yale officials who provide the context for Ernst's story. (And while he certainly lends the weight of a "credible authority" to the movie, US Senator and Yale graduate John Kerry (D-Mass.) looks a bit like someone had to explain Chris Ernst, rowing and Title IX to him before he could do the interview.)

It is in these interviews that "A Hero for Daisy" makes its strongest points because they demonstrate the profound effect that Ernst had on those around her, both personally and athletically, and the legacy which she has left the generation for which she is now a reluctant hero.

What makes "A Hero for Daisy" different from (and a necessary addition to) the canon of rowing stories is that through the interviews with Ernst and her teammates, Mazzio makes it clear that the opposition which Ernst and others like her faced came primarily from OFF the water as opposed to on it. While she had demonstrated time and time again that she was a more than capable rower, her opportunities were limited, and her accomplishments diminished by those who tended (and still tend) to utilize different yardsticks for measuring the achievements of men versus women.

Towards the end of the movie, Mazzio works several statistics about women and girls in sports into the narrative, and in doing so brings the film full circle without appearing heavy-handed; Ernst's story isn't just a rowing story, it's the story about someone who saw something she didn't like, and did something to fix it.

"A Hero for Daisy" has value as a slice of rowing history, but beyond that is a well-made portrait of a woman whose experience serves to remind us that it isn't necessarily just making the boat go fast (and Chris Ernst certainly did her share of that), but that rocking it to keep everybody awake is one of the truer definitions of "heroism." Mary Mazzio has told a rowing story that ranks up there with the best, and has brought rowing and the women in rowing into the spotlight through a person thoroughly deserving of such attention.

(Oli Rosenbladt writes frequently for row2k.com, [The Independent Rowing News](http://TheIndependentRowingNews.com), and the German rowing magazine [Rudern](http://Rudern.de).)

You can purchase the video of *A Hero for Daisy* in the [row2k rowing mall](http://row2k.com).