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## The Storm Before the Calm

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# The Storm Before the Calm



BY



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J.D.

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**EATON**



Self-discipline.

It gets some people up at 5 a.m. every day to train for a marathon. It gets others through three grueling years of law school. And it keeps Jonah Eaton, '11, battling collapsed roofs and molten lead gone awry in order to finish what he started.



Wooden boat building is an enduring hobby for Eaton's family; they've built three of various sizes and styles since his childhood. Eaton's mother once gave his father a set of plans for a 12-foot skiff as a Christmas present. By that afternoon, his father and grandfather were tearing up old bookshelves in their eagerness to start building. But Jonah upped the ante in 2005 when he suggested they build a Malabar II, a 41-foot schooner capable of traversing oceans. He was tired of his job as an engineer; his father was nearing retirement. The timing seemed perfect to construct the crown jewel of their fleet.

"I said I'd quit my job and feed myself, if they bought the wood and rented the building space," says Eaton. "I figured it would take two or three years, tops." Eight years later, Eaton intimately understands what can happen to best-laid plans.

His father facilitates the clearance of land mines for an NGO—complicated, life-and-death projects involving many people. Add in Jonah's engineering background, and it's no surprise that the boat's inception involved many diagrams, flow charts, and schedules. "The problem," says Eaton, "is that it turns out we didn't have the slightest clue how long anything would take."

Early on, Eaton spent a lot of time working alone, so maneuvering a 200-pound beam into place could consume the better part of a day. The slow pace came to a complete halt after the building site's roof collapsed, which caused extensive flooding and narrowly missed crushing the boat.


Additionally, those original flow charts didn't include a detour to Michigan Law. Eaton eventually took a year off from full-time boat building to work for the United Nations doing development work in Malawi. There, he became interested in human rights and international law, and was drawn to Michigan's refugee law program. "When Dean Zearfoss introduced our class, I was the eccentric UN guy who was building a boat," he says.

While other students relaxed during vacations, Eaton returned to Philadelphia and the Malabar II. During 1L fall break, he and 10 friends with propane melted 8,000 pounds of lead to cast the ballast keel, which provides stability to the boat. Another item was crossed off the extensive to-do list—until Eaton discovered the keel had warped as the molten lead had cooled. So winter break was spent reheating and slowly reshaping the lead. "Things progress, and then something unexpectedly weird happens where you say, 'Well, there goes the week,'" Eaton says. "Learning to handle that is part of the process."

In that process, he sees parallels to and discrepancies from law school. "Sticking with something for long periods of time, without getting distracted or discouraged, is very similar," Eaton says. "But while law school has a finite ending, with organized structure along the way, the boat is more open-ended." Of course, law school also doesn't require 10-hour days of repetitive, physical labor—or propane torches.

"The engineer and the lawyer in me appreciate the process, the functionality. But at the same time, it's beautiful. It's going to be a practical, seaworthy boat that also is stunning to look at," says Eaton, who is clerking for Judge Anne E. Lazarus of the Superior Court of Pennsylvania.

The Malabar II was designed in 1922 by John Alden, of Boston, in the tradition of New England fishing schooners. The original still exists, but only about 10 additional boats have been made worldwide. Eaton and his family had to navigate significant design gaps and modernize some of the techniques in order to make it more seaworthy and easier to maintain post-construction. The biggest parts are made from white oak for durability, while the plankings—which must be able to curve up to 46 feet in places—come from the more malleable Douglas fir. The project has drawn international attention, including from the BBC, which profiled Eaton in its *Big Dreams* video series in March.

The boat's marriage of form and function complement the union of planning and patience required to create it. And with the boat undertaking its maiden voyage on the Delaware River this fall, Eaton is willing to write off the process' frustrations. "Once it's in the water, nothing will depress me." 

PHOTOS COURTESY OF JONAH EATON



Jonah Eaton's 41-foot schooner will be capable of traversing oceans.

