When Lizzie Sorensen was not teaching first-graders at Lincoln Elementary School in Port Washington this year, the Glendale resident was likely on the water with members of the Milwaukee Rowing Club.

Lizzie Sorensen showed crewing pictures to her first-grade students (first row, from left) Emory Birling, Jonathan Arendt, (second row) Eric Pfeiffer, Max Mitchell, Kaiden Schumacher, (third row) Stephanie Schlessinger, Hunter Motiff, Austin Bentley and Craig Krueger at Lincoln Elementary School in Port Washington. In the inset photo, she rowed with the mixed-four team that took first place at Sunday's Head of the Fox race in DePere. Photo by Sam Arendt

On Sunday, Sorensen competed in her last race of the season, the Head of the Fox in DePere. She was one of two women who rowed with two Milwaukee School of Engineering male students to capture first place in the mixed-four division.

Sorensen started crewing as a novice four years ago, the spring of her first year teaching at Lincoln School.

She shares her rowing experiences with her students. Last year, one first-grader kept stats of her races with his father's help.

"I love teaching first-graders because I'm a first-grader at heart," Sorensen said. "It's exciting to see how much these kids learn, how quickly they grow and change

from the beginning of the school year to the end of the year. It's a lot of different stuff and a lot of work, but the rewards are boundless."

That's close to how she feels about the sport of rowing, something she stumbled upon.

A competitive high-school swimmer, Sorensen enjoys almost anything involving water, including boating, wake-boarding, tubing, waterskiing and kayaking.

"I was looking (on the Internet) for kayaking groups to join, but you had to have your own boat and place to store it," said Sorensen, who lived in a Milwaukee apartment at the time.

"In a related search, up came an article on the Milwaukee Rowing Club."

She was intrigued by the organization, which was started in 1891 as a men's rowing club. It is home for Marquette University and MSOE crew teams as well as high-school junior competition teams.

In 2003, the mother of a junior crew member thought it looked like fun and formed an adult group comprised mostly of mothers of young rowers. The club provided the boats and equipment.

Sorensen figured that was the type of club for her. She joined not knowing anything about rowing or the difference between sculling and open sweep, but she soon learned the jargon and techniques.

"I didn't know what to expect, so I went into it with an open mind," Sorensen said. "Now, it's 'Get me in a boat.' That's where I want to stay. I went to a class and I was caught hook, line and sinker.

"It's a sport that's physically challenging and requires a lot of strength, but anyone who is physically fit can do it."

Sorensen participates in open-sweep rowing, which requires four or eight rowers, each handling one oar, and a coxswain to steer the long, narrow boat, which is called a shell.

Sculling involves athletes rowing with two oars in single, double or quad shells with no coxswain.

Sorensen prefers the larger, more visible open-sweep method, especially with the boat traffic on the Milwaukee River, where they practice.

"My first experience was indoor practices on rowing machines, called ergs," Sorensen said.

Under the direction of a coach, she learned basic strokes, body position and rowing techniques. Then it was time to go on the river.

The club's boathouse at 1990 N. Commerce St. is in the Beerline neighborhood on the west bank of the Milwaukee River. Members row in the Milwaukee, Menomonee and Kinnickinnic rivers in the Milwaukee harbor estuary.

"My first time on the water was not pretty," Sorensen said. "When you first start learning to row, four to six people are setters (experienced rowers) in the boat. There is this whole balance issue, and you have to follow the lead of the person ahead of you."

Sorensen practices Monday and Wednesday nights with the club and does strength, resistance and cross training on her own.

This summer, she also practiced on Saturday mornings preparing for the DePere race. Some members will compete in the Oct. 9 Head of the Rock in Rockford, Ill., and two teams have qualified for the Head of the Charles in Boston, an elite international competition that Sorensen participated in last year.

"Going to the Head of the Charles was unlike any other experience," Sorensen said. "The preparation leading up to it was pretty intense. It was a lot of training on our own, working with quick-twitch muscles for that explosive drive going into the finish.

"We finished 19th of 30 in 19.29 minutes. It was an extremely fast race. Initially, we were very disappointed that we didn't get the automatic bid (for those in the top 50%), but stepping back, we realized how far we've come with half of us starting rowing competitively as adults."

The club, which had depended on volunteers, hired coaches this year — two women who crewed for the University of Wisconsin in Madison and the University of Minnesota.

"They're fresh out of competitive programs, and they're very competitive themselves. Our previous coaches were very good, but they were volunteers and wanted to row themselves," Sorensen said. "It's nice that we're training for something (the DePere race). We were so close to winning the Milwaukee Challenge."

This year's weather has been challenging for rowers, she said

"In the beginning it was so cold, it dampened people's spirits," she said. "You can't control the weather or other people's attitudes. You have to focus on what you're doing, whether it's on land working out or in the water working out.

"We have a challenging river (for practice) and if conditions aren't right, it's not safe."

Last week during practice, her boat almost hit a tree that had fallen into the river after a storm.

Debris, wildlife, blind corners and heavy boat traffic make it dangerous for their long, low, narrow crafts, Sorensen said.

“We’ve hit seagulls who wouldn’t get out of the way. Fish are another interesting thing, especially when they’re spawning,” she said.

The club switched from navy blue to high-visibility Day-Glo chartreuse uniforms this year after several near misses with other watercrafts, she said.

Most of the time, they can laugh about their encounters, Sorensen said. Not only does she enjoy the rowing experience, but also being with her teammates.

“It’s truly a fun group of women,” she said. “I feel very lucky that I stumbled upon the rowing club.”

Her boyfriend is also an avid water enthusiast, but so far hasn’t taken up rowing. The club offers three-week learn-to-row lessons for nonmembers.

More information is available at www.milwaukeerowingclub.org.