

## VIEWPOINT

# Vessel for change

By **DONNALYNN DARLING**

Albany lawmakers have a solemn responsibility to ensure that the tragic drowning deaths of three Long Island children last month were not in vain.

On July 4, these youngsters died when a 34-foot boat with 27 people onboard capsized. The death toll might have been higher had the others on board not been pulled from the water.

This tragedy needs to be used as a forceful agent of change by seeking the passage of regulations that would mandate all boaters learn the basics of boating safety. Given the multibillion-dollar recreational boating community on Long Island, such measures would have a profound and positive impact in addressing the serious accidents that occur annually on our waterways.

Currently, a boat operator over the age of 18 can operate a vessel in New York state without restriction and without having taken a boating safety course. This means that even the simplest Coast Guard requirement, like having one life jacket for each person on board, might be unknown to the boat operator.

A new law with a few simple provisions would alter our seascape. Lawmakers should require a course on the basics of boating safety for all boat owners and operators. This course should include instruction on the operation of ship radios, since cellphones don't always have service out on the water. They should require boat operators to carry their safety course completion cards with them when they are operating a boat, which is currently required of boat operators ages 10 to 18. They should mandate that boat owners carry insurance on their boats as is required for cars, so if someone is seriously injured in a boating accident or suffers significant property damage, the injured party has recourse. Finally, boat manufacturers should be made to prominently post the maximum number of people or the weight limit that the boat can safely accommodate, so passengers can tell if the boat is overloaded.

Historically, major maritime tragedies from the burning of the General Slocum in the East River to the sinking of the Andrea Doria off New England have forced safety reforms. The loss of three young lives in an overloaded boat needs to spark a similar sense of outrage to ensure that we bring a stronger rule of law to our state's waterways.

**Darling is the chairwoman of the personal injury practice at Meyer, Suozzi, English & Klein, located in Garden City.**