at a glance

• Founded in 1998 with a budget of $53,500; expanded to over $3M in 2020
• Over 800 high school aged students have participated in long-term engagement programs building a fleet of 54 boats; more than 20,000 community members have enjoyed broader programming
• 20-member full-time professional staff includes seven program alumni; every year 50 former students work for the organization part-time, receiving valuable job experience and income
• Boatbuilders recently finished a Herreshoff 12 1⁄2 that is the jewel of our fleet. Major external boatbuilding commissions include a 29-foot whaleboat for Mystic Seaport and a 28-foot steamboat for the Stevens Institute of Technology
• Six different monitoring and restoration projects are currently underway on the Bronx River, including fish, bird, and water monitoring, wetland restoration, and oyster cultivation for nutrient bioextraction
• Four on-site social workers connect participants to resources including alumni mentors, help them explore educational and career paths, and connect them to resources
• High school graduation rates in the area are 33%; for Rocking the Boat students it is nearly 100%, and their immediate college enrollment rate (enrolling the first fall after high school graduation) over the last four years averages 96%
• Program spaces includes a 2,500 square foot professional grade boatbuilding shop, fully equipped environmental laboratory, and a 25,000 square foot boatyard just steps from the Bronx River

fast facts

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impact

• On average, 96% of Rocking the Boat students graduate from high school on time
• Nearly 100% enroll in college or technical schools directly out of high school
• 57% of Rocking the Boat alumni have received their bachelor’s degrees within six years of high school graduation
• 49% of Youth Development participants enrolled for 2+ years
• 95% of participants grow in social emotional competency
our approach

youth development

Rocking the Boat engages over 200 teens per year in a series of STEM-based programs that last throughout their high school careers and into college. Participants enter as freshmen and sophomores and choose from one of three programs: Boatbuilding, Environmental Science, or Sailing. They move from being students to paid apprentices to alumni once they graduate high school, at which point they are eligible to work part-time for Rocking the Boat as Program Assistants.

All participants receive wrap-around social services provided by three licensed social workers. Together they offer participants comprehensive social and emotional support, and help them graduate from high school, apply to college or trade school, overcome obstacles to attaining a college degree or professional certification, and map out a path for reaching their long-term goals.

public programs

On-Water Classroom exposes elementary, middle, and high school students to the joy of rowing and the beauty and ecological diversity of the Bronx River. During the summertime, Bronx River Camp and Sailing Camp introduce middle school students to the activities of rowing and sailing, and allow them to explore their local natural environment.

Community Rowing invites the general public to go for a row on Saturday and Sunday afternoons from Memorial Day to Labor Day, and volunteer projects bring groups of adults up to the Bronx to support Rocking the Boat’s work, and provide outstanding teambuilding opportunities.

how students progress through the youth development program

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>student</th>
<th>apprentice</th>
<th>alumni</th>
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<tr>
<td>New students are introduced to Rocking the Boat through their schools, peer and sibling recommendations, and by participating in Public Programs. They choose one of three program tracks, boatbuilding, environmental, or sailing, and form a supportive relationship with one of the staff social workers.</td>
<td>After demonstrating the requisite technical skills and capacity for personal growth—typically this takes one to two years—students move up to this advanced level, gaining work experience, banking an average of $900 per semester, and earning college credit. Apprentices’ time with the social work team is increasingly concentrated on planning for life after high school.</td>
<td>Program graduates continue to receive many of the benefits of the youth development program after they complete high school. As life-long members of the Rocking the Boat community, alumni are eligible for college scholarships, career counseling, and networking opportunities. Some work for Rocking the Boat part time as Program Assistants, helping to teach Youth Development and Public Programs.</td>
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The Sailing Program uniquely serves its South Bronx community, where virtually no familiarity with sailing existed before, by exposing sailing to students as early as middle school and engaging them in an intensive afterschool program during their high school years in which they become proficient sailors capable of teaching sailing to others. Generally, students who enter the program have never been in a boat and often don’t know how to swim. Over the course of four years they learn not just to swim and to sail, but to teach sailing to others, while working toward receiving an internationally recognized U.S. Sailing instructor certification. In 2018 the program received U.S. Sailing Community Sailing Center status, one of only 40 such sites in the country meeting the highest standards. The Sailing Program’s apprentices teach the summer Sailing Camp, help run Community Sailing days, and are exposed to maritime career possibilities they may never have considered.
“My first time on a week-long sailing trip as a Program Assistant is a memory I will not forget. Out on the Long Island Sound, I was astonished by how quickly the students picked up on the basics of sailing. Within two days they were able to sail a boat by themselves. It was in that moment I felt a sense of accomplishment. I successfully taught my students something I love to do.”

- Marcus Caceres, former On-Water student, Environmental Job Skills apprentice, and Program Assistant

partners

Rocking the Boat is grateful to the following partners who allow sailing to be such a powerful experience for our students and the larger Hunts Point community:

America’s Cup Endeavour Programme
Hudson River Community Sailing
Morris Yacht and Beach Club

SUNY Maritime College
ONE° 15 Brooklyn Marina
Town of Greenwich, CT Byram Marina

United States Sailing Association
Yacht Racing Association of Long Island Sound
Participants may arrive at Rocking the Boat not knowing how to read a ruler and having never used tools, but they work together to build full size traditional wooden rowing and sailing boats from scratch. Boatbuilding students and apprentices study the plans and create and assemble all of the components from stem to stern, fasten the planks and frames, paint, and then launch their boat into the Bronx River.

Rocking the Boat purposely chooses boat designs that have historically been built and used by New Yorkers as a way of connecting participants to the City’s maritime past.
Throughout the 2019-2020 school year, a group of 16 Boatbuilding students will work to construct a 17-foot Whitehall, the classic rowboat design that comprises the majority of Rocking the Boat’s fleet.

Students fashion four ash oars for every Rocking the Boat boat. They use block planes and spoke shaves to remove layer after layer of wood, taking a four-sided block down to an octagonal shaft then to a hexadecagon (16-sided polygon) and ultimately to a smooth rounded column with a ½ inch thick blade at one end and a leathered grip on the other.

Apprentices' most recent project was a meticulously rendered replica, the first of its kind, from a vintage rowboat designed in Maine. The Spurling skiff project was ideally suited to the Job Skills Program, where youth develop more advanced carpentry skills in traditional wooden boatbuilding methods with a greater degree of self-direction and independence. The project started with a dilapidated original skiff that was painstakingly measured and then the pieces dismantled. By taking it apart, the apprentices were able to study its traditional construction and then replicated that to precision in their new construction. The project also preserved for posterity the beloved design of a celebrated boatbuilder. Before this project, the only existing table of offsets for this type of Arthur “Chummy” Spurling skiff was a guess. No exact measurements had ever been taken off an existing boat. The benefit to the historical and preservation communities is not actually Rocking the Boat’s finished craft, no matter how elegant, but instead the measurements taken by these students, the table of offsets they created from them, that now faithfully and forever record for the first time, the dimensions of this historic design. The apprentices are proud that the rowboat will return to its home isles in Maine where the style originated, to be used by Little Cranberry Island Yacht Club summer campers.

In keeping with Rocking the Boat tradition, Boatbuilding apprentices are taking on an exciting new project: a faithful copy of the 27’ Whitehall rowing gig American Star, the winner of a famous rowing race in New York Harbor that launched competitive rowing as a sport in this country. Built in Brooklyn in 1824, American Star was given as a gift to Revolutionary War commander the Marquis de Lafayette upon his farewell tour of the U.S. The original is still housed at Lafayette’s home at the Château de la Grange-Bléneau in north-central France. The project will be completed in good time to participate in the boat’s bicentennial celebration in 2024.

“I first joined Rocking the Boat because being able to build boats is really different from a regular afterschool program where all you do is homework. I got to do something out of the ordinary. Now when I’m in the shop I feel like I can let out that inner woman who wants to build. That’s where my passion for carpentry shows--working the wood, figuring out how the grain goes together, that’s what I need.”

- Taji Riley, former Boatbuilding student, Boatbuilding apprentice, and Program Assistant

Rocking the Boat is grateful to the following partners who allow the Boatbuilding Program to be such a powerful experience for our students and Apprentices:

**Partners**
- Herreshoff Marine Museum
- Independence Seaport Museum
- International Yacht Restoration School
- Landing School of Boat Building and Design
- Mystic Seaport
- Non-Traditional Employment for Women
- Portsides New York
- RE-CO Brooklyn
- South Street Seaport Museum
- Stevens Institute of Technology
- Teaching with Small Boats Alliance
- WoodenBoat Magazine

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**Student Projects**

**Whitehall**

**Oars**

**Apprentice Projects**

**Spurling Skiff**

**American Star**
Using scientific instruments, following detailed protocols, and working alongside environmental professionals, students and apprentices collect water quality data, monitor birds and fish, reintroduce native plant and animal species, and perform restoration work that is helping to bring the Bronx River back to life after years of neglect.
student and apprentice highlights

bacteria monitoring
Key players in a project that started in summer, 2014, apprentices are monitoring Enterococcus bacteria levels (Enterococcus is a bacteria uniquely found in human sewage). They collected samples from two different sites once a week for eight consecutive weeks, then analyzed them in their own lab outfitted with special equipment. Results showed that the presence of pathogen indicators is astronomically high after rain events, but decreases dramatically after dry periods. Through this project it was also discovered that an outflow pipe on the border of Westchester County is dumping raw sewage into the Bronx River.

wetland management
Rocking the Boat youth shoulder responsibility for maintaining three different wetlands in the estuary section of the Bronx River. In one instance, in work modelled after a successful project in Newtown Creek in Brooklyn, participants designed, built, and are monitoring planter boxes that resemble tiny tidal wetlands of substrate and native grasses. The boxes have been hung from the concrete bulkheads and built up shorelines of the Bronx River, and are naturally cleaning the water where no habitat can otherwise grow. Seasonally at the Waterwash ABC site, teenage apprentices lead groups of adult volunteers in clearing out relentless invasive species so that native grasses and other vegetation (planted years ago by past classes of apprentices) can continue to grow and serve their critical water filtering function. The third site where apprentices take on regular monitoring and maintenance is the Soundview salt marsh—restored in 2014 by the City and State of New York, Army Corps of Engineers, and neighborhood groups. Their work is ensuring regained biological diversity, ecological productivity, and the capacity of natural processes to enhance environmental quality.

microplastics
Microplastics are particularized and degraded bits of plastic material increasingly found in waterbodies of all kinds. While indications are that a significant level of microplastic is present in the Bronx River, no formal study has ever been conducted; Rocking the Boat has begun a pilot project to do it first. Apprentices have been testing the water specifically for microplastics, establishing and monitoring a baseline. Their data, plus an analysis of the types and sources of the plastic debris, will inform efforts to raise awareness in the community around plastic use and disposal and promote alternative choices that are clearly needed.

“Rocking the Boat is always teaching me something new. This experience has made me feel capable, and given me a sense of responsibility to my work and to myself.”

- Rigoberto Garcia, former On-Water student and Environmental Job Skills apprentice

partners
Rocking the Boat is grateful to the following partners who allow environmental science to be such a powerful experience for our students and the larger Hunts Point community:

- Billion Oyster Project
- Bridgeport Regional Aquaculture Science and Technology Education Center (BRASTEC)
- Bronx River Alliance
- Clark University
- Hudson River Foundation
- Hudson River Sloop Clearwater
- Long Island Sound Study
- Waterfront Alliance
- New York Botanical Garden
- New York City Audubon
- New York City Soil and Water Conservation District
- NY/NJ Baykeeper
- Rebuild by Design
- Riverkeeper
- Rozalia Project
- Storm Water Infrastructure Matters
- University of Connecticut Stamford
- Wildlife Conservation Society
Social Work is an essential component of Rocking the Boat’s comprehensive youth development model. A four-member team supports Rocking the Boat participants from the time they join the Youth Development Program until long after they graduate from high school. They offer participants social and emotional support, and help them graduate from high school, apply to college, overcome obstacles to attaining a college degree, and map out a path for reaching their long-term goals. Services include individual counseling, referrals to outside services, advocacy at school and at home, workshops and discussion groups, professional development, and college and career guidance.
“When I came here I came with a visa. With that visa I wouldn’t be able to go to college. But Liz helped me get my green card. It’s because of her that I’m going to college.”

- Bubacarr Fofana, former On-Water student and Environmental Job Skills apprentice

partners

Rocking the Boat is grateful to the following partners who collaborate with the Social Work Team in support of our students and apprentices:

Bottom Line
Bronx Connect
Bronx Defenders
Career Internship Network
Center for Anti-Violence Education
City Access New York

Hunter College Silberman School of Social Work
Hunts Point Alliance for Children
Legal Aid Society
Let’s Get Ready
Montefiore Medical Center
New York City Student Success Collaborative

New York University Silver School of Social Work
Options College Counseling at the Goddard Riverside Community Center
Planned Parenthood
Posse Foundation
community rowing, sailing, and birding

Through Community Rowing, Hunts Point residents of all ages explore the Bronx River aboard student-built wooden row boats, accompanied by staff who teach them about the local waterways. The free program takes place every Saturday from Memorial Day to Labor Day.

For four of those days, community members can also try their hand at sailing. Community Sailing aims to make sailing a staple of the South Bronx waterfront.

Community Birding brings birdwatching to the shores of the Bronx River. Identify and learn about local species with knowledgeable guides. Binoculars and field guides will be provided.
Many Rocking the Boat participants’ first contact with the organization is through public outreach programs and activities. On-Water Classroom Programs serve approximately 2,000 students per year from dozens of local schools, mainly engaging them in Rocking the Boat’s ongoing Bronx River restoration efforts but also exposing them to everything the organization has to offer. Ranging in length from a single three-hour session to weekly sessions throughout the school year, On-Water Classroom programs augment traditional classroom learning with hands-on explorations.
“Rocking the Boat is nothing short of our own national treasure! As a teacher, administrator, parent and lifetime Bronx resident, I am proud that my students, teachers, parents, colleagues and my own daughter benefit from the preeminent, inclusive and diversified programming offered by RtB. You will not find more impactful programming anywhere and I urge all to partner and explore the Bronx River; ready, set, row!”

- Stephen Ritz, Founder: Green Bronx Machine

“My first day and my last day were so different. On the first day, I was scared to go on the water. Since then I’ve learned to row, how to catch fish, crabs and shrimp. It was an interesting experience for a city girl like me...I learned some important new skills. You never know when I might use these skills in the future.”

- Elvira Quarshie, New Settlement Apartments, Bronx Helpers Program

For more information or to schedule a program, contact Sarah Miles, Director of Public Programs: sarah@rockingtheboat.org | 718.466.5799 ext. 1229

partners
The following New York City high schools, middle schools, and community-based organizations have sent students to the On-Water Classroom program:

- Bronx Arena High School
- Brooklyn Apple Kindergarten
- Entrada Academy
- Graham Windham
- High School of Language and Innovation
- Hunts Point Alliance for Children
- Hyde Leadership Charter School
- New York Harbor School
- Manhattan Academy for Language and Arts
- Manhattan Country School
- New Heights Summer Academy
- New Settlement Apartments
- New Visions Charter High School for the Humanities II
- Outward Bound Urban Explorers
- Pelham Lab School
- Renaissance Charter High School
- Schomburg Satellite Academy
- St. Ignatius School
- Summer Intensive English Language Program-CUNY
- The Point CDC
- Ya-Ya Network
Rocking the Boat provides place-based environmental education and recreational activities on the water in a community where the need for both outdoor summer programming and environmental stewardship could not be higher. Participants practice working as a team, explore the local environment as they learn how to row and sail, and discover plant and animals species in and around the river.
“On my first day I was reluctant to come because I didn’t know anyone. I don’t enjoy situations where I have to make new friends or do new things. I didn’t think I would enjoy rowing too much either. Now that it is the last day I can honestly say I am glad I came. I like my team. I liked getting to know them. Now I enjoy rowing. I’m proud because I have calluses and experience. I’m thinking of maybe coming back here, too.”

- Ney, eighth grade Bronx River camper

For more information, contact Sarah Miles, Director of Public Programs:
sarah@rockingtheboat.org | 718.466.5799 ext. 1229
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CHARTING A POSITIVE COURSE
Hunts Point nonprofit helps kids set sail for success

WORDS BY TATIANA FORSTER • PHOTOS BY JOAQUIN COT TEN
When I was younger we would mostly drive through Hunts Point as a shortcut to get back on the Bruckner. On our back-road route, my dad used to tell me about the area during the late ’70s through ’90s: If you drove down some of the roads in Hunts Point you were likely to see ladies in trench coats walking around amid the industrial area. It was a dark era for the South Bronx—the drug epidemic was widespread, it seeped into people’s buildings, corridors and apartments; building abandonment was rampant. While working for the City of New York, my dad frequented communities in Hunts Point, Soundview, Castle Hill and Parkchester. Today, it’s still an industrial mecca but tremendous efforts are being footed by the community to improve quality of life, increase access to greenspaces and establish equity.

Driving down Lafayette Avenue, I turn left onto Edge-water Road and see a brightly colored building up ahead. That’s where I’m headed. As I enter a spacious, modernly designed foyer, above me hangs a rowboat. Not something you see every day, especially in the Bronx.

Rocking The Boat (RTB), a nonprofit, was established in 1996 as a volunteer project running out of an East Harlem junior high school. It then had a short stay at Hostos Community College before moving to its home at 812 Edgewater Road in the early 2000s.

At Rocking The Boat, school-aged kids and young adults build wooden boats among many things. In fact, their slogan reads, “Kids don’t just build boats, boats build kids.” You wouldn’t expect to find this retreat on the water, amongst auto body shops, industrial bakeries and wholesale vegetable markets. Nevertheless, it’s a perfect location for...
RTB; the campus sits adjacent to the Bronx River, an ecological gem that runs 23 miles from the Kensico Dam in upper Westchester County down through the Bronx and opens into the East River, acting as an interactive classroom for all RTB programming.

Using the dock next door at Hunts Point Riverside Park, students regularly launch rowboats and sailboats out onto the Bronx River. Luckily, the two tenants sharing river access rarely get deliveries so RTB kids have VIP access to the river’s southern reach.

As I finish up my tour of the facility with founder Adam Green, teens arrive from Advanced Math & Science II, a South Bronx high school. The room fills with teenage noise. “I never thought that I would be on a boat on that water [Bronx River],” Haley Seda, a student who is part of the sailing department, told me earlier. “I never even passed by here.” Haley, 15, now knows all the technicalities of sailing, and is one of over 200 students who come here weekly, sometimes spending two to four days in the RTB building or out on the water.

Many of the students take part in a long-term youth development program, which follows them through the end of high school. They choose one of three areas as their focus: boatbuilding, sailing or environmental.

Each department focuses on different skill sets. Boatbuilding is just as it seems, a hands-on experience building boats from scratch, utilizing physical tools and teamwork. RTB purposefully chooses boat designs that have historical significance to New York City waterways. The sailing program teaches all the technical skills required to handle a row-, sail- or steamboat—becoming certified U.S. Sailing Level 1 small boat instructors by the end of the program. And the environmental program is crucial to the future health of the river. Students and apprentices collect water quality data, observe marine life, work to reintroduce native plant and animal species, and actively implement recovery work to the river, which per RTB is helping to bring the “Bronx River back to life after years of neglect.”

Once they achieve a technical skill level and capacity for personal growth, students then move on to become apprentices. In this phase, they gain work experience, earning both a wage and college credit. Upon graduating from the program, students are guaranteed lifetime membership and are eligible for future employment opportunities.

Throughout participation, students receive wrap-around services from licensed social workers on site. They are supported in everything from social and emotional counseling to help in graduating from high school and applying to colleges.

What has been created for students is a space for self-growth, room to work with their community and a team of people consistently rooting for them to succeed on water and land.

From a macro perspective, students are also contributing to their community needs. Through the water quality testing and river monitoring, they help collect data about native birds, oysters, diadromous fish and trash accumulation. According to Jamie, the environmental program director, “the river is a brackish mix of salt water, salinity varies with the tides,” she says. “It creates a special ecological environment, an estuary. After rainforests, estuaries are some of the most ecologically rich environments in the world.”

Every Saturday from the end of May to September, Rocking The Boat opens its doors to the public and offers free rowing and sailing to all residents of New York City, and beyond. And all this happens out of their Hunts Point hub, a historically disadvantaged community in the Bronx. Adam reminds me before I head out, back towards the Bruckner, “There is opportunity here in our own community. You don’t have to go to other places to get that.” Amid this ubiquitous pale shadow of the past, the river breathes new life and magic into the city.

> 812 Edgewater Road, Bronx; RockingTheBoat.org
People sail for many reasons. They spend time on the water to make memories with family and friends, to enjoy leisurely vacation days in far-off ports, to savor the thrill of competition, and even to forge careers.

There are some, however, who look at sailing differently. In their hands, sailing becomes an agent of meaningful, lasting change, helping to create better lives for those who are struggling.

Carlos Duran is one of those agents of change. He is the sailing student program director for Rocking the Boat, a Bronx, New York-based nonprofit organization where at-risk young people build wooden boats, learn to row and sail, and help restore local urban waterways. Rocking the Boat welcomes roughly 5,000 children each year, and of these, about 200 are regular participants in intensive, high-impact programs.

Duran was born and raised in the Dominican Republic, a Caribbean island nation with plenty of water but not a lot of opportunity for young people to enjoy it. “My family was very poor,” he said. “I never learned to swim. We went to the beach now and then, but it was rare, and I never went out on a boat.”

Duran lived with his carpenter father, three older brothers and two younger sisters. His mother lived in the United States, where she was working hard to earn enough money to bring the family to the land of opportunity.

“She left when I was little,” Duran said. “I didn’t even remember what she looked like. Then, when I was 14, she was able to bring us all here.”

After his arrival in the Bronx, Duran said he quickly realized that the reality of life in America didn’t quite match the visions of a boy growing up in the Dominican Republic.

“Honestly, I thought it would be better than it was,” he said. “In the DR, we had a house with a yard, and the air was much cleaner. In the Bronx, we were in a little apartment. It was tough. But I could get a better education here, and I knew that’s where opportunity would come from.”

Duran was a motivated straight-A student, graduating at the top of his eighth-grade class, despite struggling to learn English.

“I was doing pretty good,” he said quietly. “That all changed one night when, walking home alone, he was stopped by police and accused of a crime he said he didn’t commit. He spent the next five years fighting his case.

“I didn’t have a lawyer, but then I found a nice lady who defends activists,” Duran said. “She was the only one who believed me, and she told me, you have to prove to them that you’re not this person.”

To do that, the teenager would have to focus on community service and extracurricular activities. One of his teachers recommended Rocking the Boat.
Carlos Duran leads a classroom session at Rocking the Boat, top, and has a chat with Sir Ben Ainslie, head of the LandRover BAR America’s Cup team, above. It was all smiles for both instructor and students on a recent sail, left.

"Things happen for a reason," Duran said. 
At the time, Rocking the Boat only had boatbuilding and environmental science programs in place. Duran joined the latter and began testing water, learning about estuaries and examining local plants. The experience opened his eyes.

"I saw all of these kids who looked like me and talked like me," he remembered. "They were from the same neighborhoods, and they were building boats and cleaning up the river. I didn’t even know the Bronx River existed before that! I never thought all of this could be happening here."

The experience kindled an interest in environmental science in the teen who, until then, had wanted to be an architect. He also found the support system he so desperately needed.

“My grades had dropped dramatically,” Duran said. “I was just so confused by what was happening to me. I had always been law-abiding, and I was just a kid. It was a rough time. At Rocking the Boat, I had teachers who understood how I felt, and who helped me deal with my situation. And I could relate to them."

Not only do Rocking the Boat’s program directors understand and accept the issues affecting their students, they know they have to be more than teachers. They also need to serve as mentors, advisors and guides.

The majority of Rocking the Boat’s students hail from the Hunts Point section of the South Bronx, which sits in the poorest Congressional District in the nation and in the poorest zip code east of the Mississippi. Public schools here are overcrowded and underfunded, resulting in discouraged students and contributing to an alarmingly low on-time graduation rate of just 35 percent.

To provide the extra layer of support these kids need, Rocking the Boat also employs social workers to engage with students on every level, from their academic careers to their personal lives. As a result, for kids like Duran, Rocking the Boat feels like home.

“They gave me the support that my family could not give me,” Duran explained. “My mom worked all the time. I’d never even gone camping—my first time was with that program. There’s no question that Rocking the Boat improved the quality of my life.”

After graduating from high school in 2007, Duran went on to study environmental science at the college level. Fate, however, revealed other plans when Rocking the Boat built its first sailboat, a Connecticut River Drag Boat, a design originally built for the 19th century shad fishery.

“The first time on the water, I was scared as heck,” Duran said, laughing. “I couldn’t swim. When the boat rocked, I hung onto the gunwale for dear life, and when it heeled, I was sure the boat was flipping over. But it was exciting, and I thought it was just amazing that you could go anywhere with… well, a blanket! Once I got accustomed to it, I loved it.”

He signed up for a 10-day expedition aboard a steel-hull, square-rigged tall ship from New London, Connecticut, to Boothbay Harbor, Maine. It was life-changing, and Duran had just one word for his first trip on open ocean.

“It was marvelous,” he said. “And all these people, it was their career to do this! I’d never thought of that, the idea that this could be me. And I realized I wanted to sail. This is what I wanted to do.”

He applied for a job with the Hudson River Sloop Clearwater organization, hoping to be a deckhand. He didn’t get it due to lack of sailing experience; he did, however, get a position as an education intern. His
responsibilities included teaching passengers and students the history of the Hudson Valley, the biology of the river, and how to hoist sails and tie knots.

“I learned how to be a good teacher,” he said simply.

The next semester, he got the deckhand job. After that, he became bosun.

“I was determined to be a captain one day,” Duran said. “The only problem was maintenance. I hated that, and I skipped maintenance days all the time. But I learned that to be a captain, you need to love the boat as much as you love to sail. A good captain takes care of his ship, and after that, I never missed a single maintenance day.”

Duran spent five days a week on the ship. The other two days, he worked as an apprentice with Brennan Boatbuilding in Ossining, New York.

“I had a lot of sleepless nights, but I’m glad I did it,” Duran reflected. “I learned so much.”

He went on to serve as second mate and then chief mate aboard the Hudson River Sloop Clearwater, and he continued helping out at Rocking the Boat whenever he could. By this time, the staff was considering a new sailing program. Adam Green, founder and executive director, told Duran he wanted him on the team.

“I said I’d love to, because if it weren’t for Rocking the Boat, I wouldn’t be who I am today,” Duran said. “The problem was, I knew how to rig and maintain boats, and how to teach sailing, but all on tall ships.”

He spent the next year working on certifications for keelboat and small-boat sailing, as well as for powerboat operation. John Petrillo, Rocking the Boat’s sailing program director, took Duran under his wing.

“He’s the most wonderful teacher I’ve ever known,” Duran said. “I learned a great deal from him.”

In the sailing program, Petrillo was responsible for job skills apprentices, while Duran took on new students. He observed that the kids coming into the program were exactly like he was as a teenager.

“They’re scared of the water, and they’re intimidated, yet they’re in awe of the opportunities they’re facing,” he said. “And, they’re amazed at being told they can do these things. Here, they don’t have to traverse all the barriers they might face in other programs. They feel at home here, and I remind myself of that every day. These kids are all from ‘down the block,’ and this is a safe place for them.”

As they say at Rocking the Boat, kids don’t just build boats. Boats build kids. And Duran is a perfect example of the organization’s commitment to building strong, able, healthy individuals—and to providing ongoing opportunities.

“This isn’t a short-term engagement program,” Duran explained. “It’s long-term, and that’s true for all students and alumni. When I think about what I’m doing, in terms of my goals and my happiness, I’m providing opportunities to those who need it the most. What better way to give back?”
As a life-long sailor and long time yachting journalist, who’s just barely old enough to remember the longest winning streak in sports being broken when the New York Yacht Club’s 132-year strangle hold on the America’s Cup was lost in 1983, I came to New York earlier this month to witness America’s Cup history.

I came to see the Cup—the actual silver trophy that billionaires, tycoons, and even a few loud-mouth playboys have fought for since 1851. And I came to see America’s Cup racing—on some of the fastest and most technologically advanced racing yachts in the world—off lower Manhattan for the first time since 1920.

But, as I was motoring up the East River with businesswoman and philanthropist Wendy Schmidt (the co-founder of The Schmidt Family Foundation and 11th Hour Racing, separate foundations that are committed to sponsoring and promoting organizations that are applying new knowledge and innovation and advancing original research in science, energy and the sustainability of the world’s biosphere), and Sir Ben Ainslie (the founder and skipper of Team Land Rover BAR that’s dedicated to winning the America’s Cup for Britain, and also sponsored by Schmidt’s 11th Hour Racing) the day after the event, I quickly realized that the well-hyped return of America’s Cup racing to NYC may have been cool, but helping underserved kids in the Bronx overcome poverty, violence, and educational challenges, and saving the planet from our own, dangerously outdated thinking is...critical.

As I learned, Wendy Schmidt is a businesswoman, sailor, and philanthropist who not only cares about the serious problems facing our planet. She’s also very smart, very connected, and with her husband, Eric Schmidt, the long serving CEO of Google who is now the Chairman of Alphabet Inc, she is committed to bringing significant resources to foster innovative ideas and advance sustainability efforts all over the world.

But saving the environment wasn’t the specific reason we were headed up the East River the day after the America’s Cup came to New York. In fact, Schmidt and Ainslie were headed to the South Bronx to visit Rocking The Boat, an organization that’s dedicated to saving kids in the Hunts Point section of the South Bronx by teaching them how to build wooden boats and get out on the water the water in spite of living in the poorest Congressional District in the nation.
Program Executive Director Adam Green explained how Rocking The Boat helps kids overcome the realities of domestic and street violence, under-resourced schools and inadequate family support by teaching them traditional wooden boat building, sailing, and environmental science in a warm, welcoming, respectful, and safe place. And he also spoke about helping young people set and achieve goals and providing them with the tools, resources, and guidance they need to reach their goals.

Wendy and Ben went for a row in boats the kids built and saw in their eyes how their unique experience at Rocking the Boat could have a positive impact on the rest of their lives. The kids were in awe of Ben and I even saw how the theme of the Op Ed piece he published the next day about the difficult racing conditions was sparked when the kids asked “So, how was racing in NYC?”

And while there may not seem to be any similarities between inner city kids sailing and rowing homemade boats in the South Bronx, and the best sailors in the world racing the most technologically advanced boats in the world, Schmidt’s 11th Hour Racing supports Rock the Boat for the same reason it supports Team Land Rover BAR—both teams are working to make a significant impact on some of the world’s toughest challenges.

“The 11th Hour Project was started when we founded the foundation back in 2006,” Wendy tells me as we speed back down the East River after the Rock The Boat event. “It was dedicated originally to funding people working on climate and clean energy.

“But here we were in Silicon Valley thinking we’re all about solutions. So we were working on the environment and clean energy when we realized that you weren’t going to be able to solve the climate problem if you didn’t address agriculture.

“We are systems-thinkers,” she adds with a spark in her eye. “And that’s what we apply to everything we do. Within a few years of working in the agricultural space we realized human rights must be addressed here. There are people not being paid for the work they’re doing. There are people whose health is not being considered at all. There are human rights at stake here.

“Within a couple of years the people I was spending my time with were fascinated by the systems idea and had a project and suggested that we create a branch of the whole business that was focused on the sailing community and maritime industries—some of the most natural advocates for the health of the oceans there is.

“That’s how it all (11th Hour Racing) got started. It began with sponsoring small teams. We provide grants that go out to different groups like Rocking the Boat and many others. We look at groups like this as very strategic players in reaching new audiences and spreading a new way of thinking.”

“And is ‘reaching new audiences and spreading a new way of thinking’ why you’re sponsoring Land Rover BAR?” I ask over the roar of the wind as we speed back down the river.

Bringing sustainability to sailing at this scale will cost more upfront in some respects and that’s where our sponsorship of Land Rover BAR comes in. They are not only trying to “raise awareness” but they are actually engaging the entire Land Rover BAR team [sailors, designers, industrial engineers etc.] so the team can be competitive AND reduce its carbon footprint. Schmidt also believes that corporations in many sectors will soon follow her lead in making sustainability a core element in their sports sponsorship programs.

“All the sailors we work with at 11th Hour Racing are incredibly enthusiastic about this,” she says. “I ended up supporting Ben Ainslie because I met him after the last America’s Cup. I was on the organizing committee in San Francisco and we ran the greenest event that the public had ever had in San Francisco. He told me what he wanted to do a sustainability based racing team. And could I come on as a sponsor?”

“And you knew he wasn’t sort of giving you a line?” I said. “You knew he meant it?”

“He’s the real thing,” Schmidt says with a sincere smile.

And so is she.

When he’s not sailing or pushing a baby stroller all over New England, Bill Springer covers superyachts, offshore adventure, luxury travel, and technology. Follow him on Twitter or LinkedIn.