

# Rocking the Boat

August 15, 2012 by Alex Halberstadt

*A hands-on program that builds boats and character.*

*Brought to you by Liberty Mutual's  
The Responsibility Project*



Down a steep hill from Hunts Point Avenue, a Bronx street lined with marsilla joints and storefronts with bootleg Yankee caps in the windows, there's Edgewater Road and a length of vestigial train track. An occasional freight still passes by. In fact, sometimes it seems as though the track acts as a kind of temporal boundary, bisecting not only this edge of the Hunts Point neighborhood, but entire decades in the city's past.

Inside a warehouse along the track, down a staircase, there's a room with a wall of carpenters' tools and several unfinished cedar hulls of old-fashioned Whitehall rowing boats. Some shipping containers out back hold completed vessels that, in times past, could be seen along the city's estuaries and waterways and up and down the Atlantic seaboard – there's a Cape Cod oyster skiff, a bateau, a colonial river ferry, a dory, a peapod and a Melonseed skiff. Today the boats are launched on the Bronx River, which flows behind the building and happens to be the neighborhood's most unlikely feature; calm and broad, bordered by scrub and lush greenery, it may be the most bucolic body of water in New York.

The boats here are being constructed not by some bearded naval obsessive but by a gaggle of high-school-age teenagers. Under the direction of a handful of builders, they pore over architectural drawings, create patterns and construct the backbone of the vessels before sawing and steaming planks into the desired shape and finally painting the boats. The paint jobs can be anything but historic – one Whitehall is painted the colors of a Nike sneaker, another has a shark maw on the bow – and the students come up with the names for the finished craft: these include Tenacity, Culture, Essence and Audacity. Selected by an organization called Rocking the Boat, many of the students come from the poorest sections of the Bronx; in addition to learning building and boat-handling skills, they receive counseling, participate in workshops and embark on camping trips and sailing expeditions up the Hudson and along Long Island Sound.

Since its founding in 1998, Rocking the Boat has branched out. Roughly half the students in its youth development program work on environmental projects, some in conjunction with the city's park service and marine biologists at the University of Connecticut; recently they've introduced oyster reefs and reintroduced the alewife, a cousin to the herring, into the Bronx River. They've also piped storm water away from the city's sewer system, to avoid overflows that can pollute the river. On Saturdays from May to September, the organization brings its boats to nearby Hunts Point Riverside Park to offer free rowing and guided tours to the public. In the summers, the boatbuilding program relocates upstate, to Philipsburg Manor in Sleepy Hollow, where students wear 18th-century costume and use traditional hand-tools. Rocking the Boat even accepts custom orders from those wanting a wooden boat of their own.

"I was never really into high school," said Jen Rios, a 19-year-old paid Program Assistant at the Hunts Point shop and a student at Bronx Community College, where she's studying criminal justice, hoping eventually to become a defense attorney. "Building a boat is like a puzzle, it makes my brain work," she continued. "Without it I don't think I'd be in college." One of four siblings, Rios says that Rocking the Boat provided the motivation that school and her family couldn't offer. "My mother tries, but it's not enough for me," she said. "Here, they really stay on you."

Along with Bryce LeFort, a lanky builder who's one of the organization's 12 full-time staff, Rios was helping some younger builders fit a curved piece of cedar into the hull of a 17-foot carvel-planked rowboat. One of them, a quiet, intense senior at nearby Morris High School named Sekou Kromah, arrived in the Bronx three years earlier from Liberia knowing almost no English. "If I wasn't doing this, I'd probably be watching TV or on Facebook," he said. "Before coming here I had never been sailing or camping. Now most of my friends are here."

The organization was the brainchild of Adam Green; as a teenager, he got his first taste of sailing aboard the *Clearwater*, the sloop launched by folk singer and activist Pete Seeger and some friends to protect and focus attention on the Hudson. While taking time off from Vassar College, Green volunteered at an East Harlem junior high; together with 10 students, he built an 8-foot dinghy that they launched at semester's end in the school's swimming pool. Having felt directionless in college, Green knew suddenly what he was meant to do. After graduating, he returned to the same East Harlem neighborhood with a substitute-teaching certificate and soon began an after-school boatbuilding program; eight months later, he and his students launched the first of the 30 vessels Rocking the Boat participants have since completed. "People who find out what I do think that I'm primarily in this to help others," said Green. "Actually, I'm doing the thing I most want to do with my life."

At the shop in Hunts Point, Green pointed out some tall planks that his students will use to construct their most ambitious project to date – a 29-foot mid-19th-century boat that will hang from the Charles W. Morgan, the country's last wooden whaling ship, at Mystic Seaport in Connecticut. The smell of fresh sawdust filled the space as two students slowly fed a piece of timber through a table saw. It was late, and Green conferred with a social worker before putting on his coat and waving goodbye to the students. "In everything we do, there's a single message we try to impart to our kids," said Green on his way out. "Despite what they've heard their whole lives, they have everything they need to succeed already inside them."

*Alex Halberstadt is the author of Lonely Avenue: The Unlikely Life and Times of Doc Pomus. His writing has appeared in The New York Times, GQ, Salon, and other publications.*