

Hangin' Out

(April '01) It is 4:30 p.m. on a Tuesday in the Bronx, in a precinct known for the second-highest rate of juvenile arrests in the city, the 44th. Inside a storefront on 174th Street, local teenagers gather. Sawdust and lumber litter the floor; strains of Bob Marley play in the background, punctuated by laughter and occasional chatter. Two boys use a carpenter's plane to shape a piece of mahogany. "It's the stem," one of them explains, using the nautical term as if he had been born on the sea. The storefront is a boat building workshop, and these teens are building a wooden boat. Rocking the Boat is one of many teen after-school programs offered by New Settlement Apartments in the Mount Eden area of the southwest Bronx. New Settlement's teen programs range from community service to sports to homework help, and serve some 360 local teenagers, many of whom live in the New Settlement housing project. Though teen after-school programs vary widely both at New Settlement and throughout the city, all programs meet one critical need: they provide teenagers with supervised activities during the hours after school.

TEEN TIME, TEEN TROUBLE

According to various studies, juveniles are most likely to be both the victims and the perpetrators of crime in the four hours after the end of the school day. The Federal Bureau of Investigation notes a tripling in juvenile crime between 3 p.m. and 8 p.m. "Most kids have parents who are working and out of the home between 3 and 6," said Samantha Vincent, director of an after-school program administered by the Educational Alliance in Manhattan. "What are their options? To go home to an empty house, or to go hang out on a street corner."

Unsupervised time after school puts children at great risk of being involved not just in crime, but also substance abuse and teen pregnancy, according to studies by the National Center for Juvenile Justice; the risk is greatest during the teenage years.

"The majority of kids in this neighborhood don't have that rich menu of things to do after school that kids in affluent suburban communities have," says Jack Doyle, director of New Settlement Apartments, a middle-income development that houses 900 families, 300 of whom are formerly homeless.

Despite the need for teen after-school programs, there are many fewer programs for teens than for younger children, according to Jason Schwartzman of the Partnership for After-School Education, who surveyed some 1,073 youth programs in the city, and found that only 35 percent provide activities for teenagers.

"Programs for teens are considered more difficult and more expensive," said Vincent. "The potential risks are higher. High school kids can do drugs, have sex, and be violent." One of the greater challenges facing providers of teen after-school programs is keeping them interested. "The older the kid, the more difficult it is," Schwartzman said. "Teenagers have independence, and if they're bored they can leave if they want to."

"You must provide something pretty exciting to get kids off the streets," said Vincent.

BUILDING BOATS

Rocking the Boat, one of the more unusual after-school programs available to New York City teens, seems to have no trouble keeping kids interested. "I wanted to develop something kids and parents couldn't say no to," said Adam Green, the program's director.

Each semester, Green recruits 16 teenagers to construct a 14- or 17-foot Whitehall, a traditional Hudson River rowboat. The project takes an entire semester of after-school work, during which students learn and practice basic carpentry skills as well as some applied mathematics, science and history. Green's crew will finish their current boat in June, and plan to launch it from Hunts Point and row down the Bronx River.

Begun in 1998, Rocking the Boat has grown popular - this semester, 23 signed up, although Green can only take 16. Students grow to feel invested in the project as they see the boat begin to take shape, and gain an unusual sense of accomplishment.

Meliza Pena, 16, a student at William Howard Taft high school, is building her second boat this semester. "When I first saw it, I wondered, how are we going to build a boat in the Bronx when there's no water?" Now, she is sold. "If I can accomplish something I never thought I could do, I can accomplish anything!"

BUILDING KIDS

Rocking the Boat provides more for teens than just a reason to stay off the streets. "The purpose of Rocking the Boat is not to build boats," Green said, "it's to build kids."

Some teens are most excited about the hands-on skills they are learning. "It's not really the boats that interest me, it's the building," explained Elliyaas Carter, 15, who hopes to someday repair airplanes. "It's the practical skills," said Ronnie Perez, 14. "We've also built things like tables for the workshop. It's so easy!"

Other teenagers value the less tangible skills they have gained. "I've learned a lot about leadership," said Meliza Pena, who has learned how to speak in public by representing the program at various events and festivals, and who gained work experience as a boat-building apprentice. Students are given much of the responsibility for organizing the boat shop and the construction process and other activities.

Successful after-school programs for teens are not just about keeping kids out of trouble, but about respecting and valuing them, according to Megan Nolan, a social worker at New Settlement. "A successful program has the view that teens are a resource in the community rather than a problem to solve."

"If students are made to feel like their work or their participation is integral to the success of the overall program," Vincent said, "they'll want to come."

TEEN TIME

It is 7:45 p.m. on a Tuesday in the Bronx. A parent chats with Green, while a group of staff and students lingers in the office. They seem reluctant to leave. Edmanuel Roman, 15, looks at some photos taken throughout the afternoon. He likes what he sees. "It really looks like I'm doing something, like we're all working together."