

ROCKING THE BOAT IS FIGHTING POVERTY ON THE FRONT LINES IN NYC

By Carrie Sheffield October 13, 2014

BRONX, NY — Saws and electric screwdrivers buzz through the sunny workroom of Rocking the Boat. Curly wood shavings litter the floor of the brightly-painted warehouse on Edgewater Road just west of Hunts Point on the Bronx River. Busy teenagers cut, hammer and assemble boat parts. Others drill, caulk and loft. A handmade sign reminds them to “Use The Right Tool for the Right Job.”

Out back, another group of teenagers studies water salinity, turbidity, and dissolved oxygen from educators who later organize the teens to paddle handmade boats with names like “Knowledge,” and “Aurora.”

In the early evening, a gaggle of high school seniors and their parents — some with toddlers in tow — gather in the front room with professional counselors to discuss the college application process. The building’s atmosphere is relaxed and homelike, yet humming and industrious.

Rocking the Boat is a non-profit organization that teaches underprivileged high school kids from the Bronx how to create boats and navigate them on the water. It helps students conduct research projects with universities and other organizations interested in environmental protections and monitoring local ecology. In the process, kids build confidence, work ethic, and friendships. Its motto: *“Kids don’t just build boats, boats build kids.”*

Kavon Wilson, 17, a bespeckled senior at High School of Computers and Technology, is charismatic, relaxed and light-hearted as he waits for the college prep session to begin. He joined Rocking the Boat his sophomore year, a turning point for him.

“That was a year when I finally began to break out of being self-absorbed,” Wilson told Opportunity Lives. “Rocking the Boat catalyzed the process. It gave me the confidence, as far as defining who I am around others, and I used that in a positive way.”

Wilson said the organization offers strong male mentorship, particularly for his younger brother, Jacob Evans, 15. The program influenced Wilson’s collegiate plans to study environmental science, along with drama, which he said he pursued after Rocking the Boat got him interested in trying new things. He’s since acted in several plays through the local Epic Theater Ensemble.

“Rocking the Boat attracts the culture of treating people so amiably that it really makes a difference,” Wilson said. “I just fell in love with the place.”

Rocking the Boat also helps counter a trend identified by the National Park Service, which says millennials, particularly from urban communities, have less exposure and affinity for national outdoor wonders, a worrisome trend for the future of conservation.

Fifteen-year-old Nilda Mendez, a soft-spoken sophomore at the High School of Computer and Technology, said the program’s environmental training gave her an edge in science class at school.



Students prepare to launch their boats near the Bronx, New York.

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“It’s really awesome, it’s cool,” Mendez said, designated today’s captain for the boat Nereid. “It’s different. It opens your eyes to a lot of things that other kids can’t do. It teaches me a lot of things about the environment and also manners. It’s a really family type of environment, nobody bullies.”

Steve Couvertier, 15, a classmate of Mendez, who introduced him to the program, said Rocking the Boat helped him overcome his fear of water.

“It gives space to mess up,” he said. “It does build up my confidence.”

Bronx County, particularly the neighborhood around Hunts Point, has high poverty concentration, with Census Data showing income levels well below state and national medians. Rocking the Boat fights on the frontlines against poverty, offering students a chance to learn technical skills that diversify the pathways out of high school beyond what founder Adam Green described as a too narrowly-focused, college-or-bust mentality.

“It’s a lot easier to get kids into college than into technical training,” Green said. “College is definitely not the way to go for everybody.”

Green said the American economy is ill-equipped to serve students who lack the skills or interest to attend college, saying part of his work is “deprogramming” students to realize there are a range of options after secondary school. Pointing to informal networks that dominate hiring for low-skilled jobs, Green said this makes it difficult to find work unless you know the right people.

Green said he’d like to see better vocational and technical training for young students, and he’s doing his part by selecting from a pool (and a competitive one at that: 10 spots with 200 applicants for the summer program) of students who don’t necessarily excel in academics or sports. Rocking The Boat gives students a chance to learn skills that give them a competitive edge. All the students come from impoverished families and must explain in an essay what attracts them to the place.

“We’re not just looking for the instant gratification kid,” he said. “It’s all about wanting to be here.”

Green said there are some 800 program alumni and 15,000 community members served through community boating outings and charity events, including a concert with the late folk artist Pete Seeger.

“It was a really, really powerful experience for the kids involved,” Green said of leading his first boat building experience. For all kids building and navigating boats he says, “They feel good about themselves. That sense of pride and purpose is something we all need.”



Students partake in a college prep class at Rocking the Boat. The organization also provides technical training to diversify students' pathways after high school.