A Watery Road to Success

By Elizabeth Green

Kids taking to the water in boats is the Rocking the Boat building program for high schoolers is not only teaching the students how to row, they’re getting out in boats they’ve built themselves. The objective of Rocking the Boat, Inc., is to empower kids by assigning them work with tangible goals while teaching them about teamwork and academic and social skills.

“Get to kids turned on to the resources both around them and inside them. To know that they can do the things that they want to with their lives, and how more choices and more power to access those choices than they might have known before,” says Adam Green, the organization’s founder and its executive director.

Green got hooked on water even while doing a volunteer project in college: as a child he spent a lot of time with his parents on Hudson on the environmental shop, the Cleanwater. He is now vice-president on the Cleanwater’s board of directors.

The free high school program he now runs has after school and summer courses and offers both boat building and on-water education (which includes environmental science and maritime skills). They serve 400 kids annually.

The first step is a trip to the Hudson Valley to harvest wood. Once the kids select and cut the wood, they apply math, carpentry, and organizational skills to build 14- to 17-foot long Whitehall rowing boats in the shop. The final step is the launching ceremony in the Bronx River.

Rocking the Boat also offers an Out-of-Door Program, which teaches students the skills to monitor and be caretakers of the river. Using boats built by their peers, the Out-Water students work with area scientists to collect data and water samples, conduct research, monitor habitats, and study restoration.

Requiring less physical work, schools and other organizations can participate in the program’s Community Environmental Education program, which puts the river in the classroom.

“We do basic programming where we just take kids out on the river and go through basic environmental programming with them,” explains Green. “We’re doing a program in the spring with an architecturally-focused high school — Pablo Narducci”

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H.S. — and we’re doing a specific project on architectural development along the Bronx River and parks creation and landscaping. We have all the resources of the river and where’s around it and how useful.

Aside from boat building, Rocking the Boat offers students a place to be themselves and to learn about self-sufficiency. The program does not, however, intend to be a replacement for school. Program staff collect report cards and keep in touch with each participating student’s teachers to make sure kids are keeping up with their studies.

“No way does Rocking the Boat want to be a deterrent or distraction from school, so it’s really important that kids maintain their grades while being in the program,” emphasizes Green. “If they don’t do well in school — unlike the normal response to kick them off the program, we use the program as leverage. We encourage and mandate that they take part in nurturing programs, for example.”

To apply to the program, high school kids must complete an application and be available for an interview with their parents.

“Parents are welcome to stop by the shop or the water any time. Parents are sort of the royalty that we all roll out the carpet for. That’s what is going to make it, make us change, getting parents involved and giving kids a reason to want to be around parent.”

Green says that interested parents should contact him directly. “I’d love to talk to them. By far and away, the most successful kids have come through parents who are independently interested and pushing the kids to get involved.”

Detailed information on the program and the application process can be found on the Rocking the Boat website: www.rockingtheboat.org. You can also call (718) 466-5799. email: adam@rockingtheboat.org.