

Seaworthy fun for the family

Have paddle, will travel down the beautiful Bronx River

By Tiziana Rinaldi

Row, row, row your boat gently down the Bronx River... This spring there is no need to leave the Bronx for an afternoon of water fun, ecological awareness and outdoorsy family playtime.

Rocking the Boat, the Hunts Point based non-profit, youth development, advocacy and environmental organization, whose core activities revolve around traditional wooden boatbuilding, is launching its first full-fledged community rowing program.

"It's a wonderful thing to do with your family," said Adam Green, executive director and founder of Rocking the Boat, "this is an opportunity to do something really different, really fun and really exciting that involves working together."

People not only can go rowing on the beautiful Bronx River, a largely untapped natural resource by the majority of borough's dwellers, explained Green, but they are given the opportunity to do so with gorgeous boats, handmade with natural materials (oak and cedar) by local high school kids.

A fleet of 12 rowboats, ranging in design from 14-foot Whitehalls (typical of the New York Harbor region), a Cape Cod Oyster Skiff (a colonial river ferry), an elegant Rangeley Lakes Boat or a Melonseed Skiff (a decked sailboat common in New Jersey tidal estuaries) will be rolled out of the Congressman Jose Serrano Riverside Campus for Arts and Environment, Rocking the Boat's current location, giving participants direct access to the river flow.

"People go to museums to look at boats like these," said Green, who looks forward to exposing more families to the existing recreational and educational options the Bronx has to offer.

"Here they can actually get out and use them."

Introduced as a pilot program after the opening of the Hunts Point Riverside Park in May 2007, Rocking the Boat's free community rowing has quickly garnered the attention of surrounding neighborhoods.

Mostly populated by immigrants from either Puerto Rico or the Dominican Republic, where rowboats and boatbuilding are familiar leisure and economic activities, the organization has been very successful in sharing resources of great appeal to the local communities.

Rocking the Boat now hopes to expand on that base and start developing a borough wide following. Fishing, boat handling and water safety, as well as a boat captain certification program may also be added to the already engaging agenda of community rowing to focus skills and



Paddlers enjoy a day of rowing down the Bronx River.

enhance insights on the many uses of the Bronx River.

"It's free, everything is so nice, so we went on a boat," said Morrisania resident and stay home mom Sandrine Galindo-Copitch, whose sons Jack, Samuel and Max are four, three and two years old respectively.

"Everybody was very nice and the people in charge so knowledgeable, we've done it almost every Saturday, last summer."

The young family, said Galindo-Copitch, had never taken the children rowing before and found it to be very suited especially for young kids, who get easily engrossed by it. Rocking the Boat's environmental program seamlessly ties family fun and on-water educational curricula, trying to bring awareness on important ecological issues facing the Bronx River.

"The kids loved it," commented Galindo-Copitch, "you're on the water, they learned about the environment, they saw a horseshoe crab. It's all very exciting for them."

A typical day starts with distribution of educational material (charts, photographic brochures, etc.) and observation of displays, which include a large operating fish tank, to help illustrate river ecology problems and successes.

Participants are then fitted for life jackets and, depending on their interests and abilities, given instructions on how to position themselves on the boat. Each of the small vessels can hold up to six people including, as per Rocking the Boat policy, one of the program's assistants. Since no prior rowing or swimming experience is required, participants are asked to sign a legal waiver.

"We might put one person in rowing position," said Green, "unless the family feels really confident and they want to take over, even so [for safety reasons] we never let them go off by themselves."

Once on the water a kind of reverence, a sense of awe overcomes parents and children, said Green, who has observed many families during the summer long pilot program.

"People are usually wide eyed," said the Vassar educated executive director, "this is a unique experience that generally makes them pretty quiet."

For some it can be really uplifting, added Green who remembered a man saying, 'I can come out here, take a boat, go on the river and feel this free.'

Very often though, it's a heightened experience of interdependence, effective communication, structured functioning and teamwork, all valuable lessons, especially in a family setting. If a person gets

up, exemplified Green, the boat starts rocking, therefore showing the importance of listening, following directions, and becoming aware of each member's fundamental contribution.

Role reversal is also not uncommon. If a child is placed in rowing position, which depending on circumstances Rocking the Boat may allow families to do, then literally everyone stands out in his or her own way, immediately highlighting a spirit of support and joint effort.

Ultimately though, it is something that kids will remember and parents will feel very special about.

"How many times, growing up, have we gone to the movies with our parents? Do we remember all of them?" Asked Green, "here's a family pastime that will make a parent feel like 'Look how cool I am, look what I'm doing with my children,' and that kids will love."

Rocking the Boat's community rowing program will start April 18 from 4-6 p.m. and will take place every Friday and Saturday during spring and fall semesters. The program will be available on Saturdays only during the summer months.

For more information, visit www.rockingtheboat.org and select community rowing program. The program is free to the public.