

BIG TOWN **BIG HEART****BOLD NEW COURSE**

Rocking the Boat shows youngsters how to develop new skills and test them on the city's waterways.
Photos by Joaquin Cotten

**At Rocking the Boat, kids learn to navigate life**

BY HOLLY REICH
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Adam Green started Rocking the Boat in 1996 as a volunteer project in an East Harlem junior high school. He and his students built an 8-foot wooden dinghy and launched it in the building's basement pool. Since then, Rocking the Boat has built 40 wooden boats, ranging from 8 to 30 feet long, and served 3,000 young people and community members a year.

What started as a one-man operation has evolved into a nonprofit organization with 16 full-time staff members, including three social workers.

Rocking the Boat's home is a 6,000-square-foot converted warehouse in the Hunts Point section of the South Bronx. The space, adjacent to the Bronx River, holds a classroom, a boat-building shop, an office and a science lab.

"We run a range of programs that serve the community, schools and groups, and offer everything from boat-building, sailing, environmental science and restoration to paid apprenticeships," says Green.

He says the group is partnering

with scientists from universities and public agencies on endeavors including growing mussels, seaweed and oysters to filter sewage release. "We are currently building a 29-foot whale boat on contract for Connecticut's Mystic Seaport Museum," he notes.

"Rocking the Boat empowers young people challenged by severe economic, educational and social conditions to develop the self-confidence to set ambitious goals and gain the skills necessary to achieve," says Green.

He grew up listening to folk singer and environmentalist Pete Seeger and realized early on that being close to nature, working with his hands and helping people were his inspirations.

The majority of Rocking the Boat students come from the Hunts Point section and adjacent neighborhoods.

"Hunts Point sits in the poorest congressional district in the nation and in the poorest zip code east of the Mississippi. Public schools in the South Bronx are overcrowded and underfunded, resulting in discouraged students and contributing to an alarmingly low on-time graduation rate of just 35%," Green points out.

Volunteers like Mike Robinson are crucial for the group.

Robinson has been working with Rocking the Boat every week for the last seven years. He organized the Little Neck Bay Regatta for two years and urged friends to contribute to Rocking the Boat instead of giving him gifts for his 70th birthday.

A year ago, he accepted an invitation to join the group's board of directors.

"I've been on the water for 60 years," Robinson notes. "I grew up in Flushing, Queens. When I was 15 years old, my dad bought a sailboat and I learned to sail in Little Neck Bay."

After retiring, he met Green in 2005 at a sailing forum. "I'd

learned a great deal that I could impart to Rocking the Boat, and I thought that if I could participate in some way it would be good," he adds.

"The reality is that these are inner city kids, sophisticated way beyond what I was at their age in terms of what goes on in the world, and on another level, they are very naive. To watch them be confronted with a situation and conquer it is a real joy, even something as simple as being able to tie an efficient knot in a rope."

Among other tasks, Robinson helps build a boat with the kids each semester. A few years ago, the organization harvested a large

oak tree from the New York Botanical Gardens that was knocked down in a storm. They milled it and used it to build three boats.

"It is wonderful watching the kids come in. At first, they don't know a chisel from a plane. They become a small group of kids building a boat and creating a surrogate family. They teach and respect one another," he adds.

At the end of each semester, the students name the boat, decorate it and christen it with ... what else but Bronx River water?

"I've lived my passion," says Robinson. After the interview, he went to pick up his wife for an afternoon spin around Little Neck Bay on his sailboat.

"My wife and I, we are probably the two largest cheerleaders for the organization. She has seen how good it is for me. When you donate some of yourself to an organization, you always get more than you give," he concludes.

To learn more about Rocking the Boat, call (718) 466-5799 or visit rockingtheboat.org.

On Saturday, Sept. 29, Rocking the Boat holds its annual fundraiser: a day-long, 27-mile row around Manhattan. To learn more about participating or donating, go to rockingmanhattan.org.

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Make a bow: Teams work together to design and build their own boat, then learn how to handle it.