Hope floats
A Bronx boatbuilding program teaches kids lessons they can carry off the water  
By Alec Appelbaum

Boating's reputation as a rich man's sport is hardly undeserved. For one, it requires access to two critical resources—water and a boat. For the last six years, Adam Green has been making those assets available to scores of young New Yorkers through his Bronx-based boatbuilding program.

Green, 30, is the foundering director of Rocking the Boat, a nonprofit organization that teaches high-school students how to construct and operate 14- to 17-foot-long rowboats. The 15-week program—which is offered after school and throughout the summer—is free and open to anyone of high-school age who completes an application and interview. Its mission is to empower youngsters by assigning them measurable tasks.

On Saturday 24, several recent alumni will display the fruits of their labor at the Amazing Bronx River Boat Flotilla, which will showcase nine vessels they made by hand, from scratch. Coordinated by the Bronx River Alliance, the event will commence with a six- mile paddle along the river and culminate in a family-friendly block party at Concrete Plant Park, featuring boat rides, games, walking tours and live entertainment.

“This will be one of the first times that our students will work with other groups on the river,” shop foreman—boatbuilding assistant Ted Okie says. “I’m sure a bunch of our kids are going to be taking out kids who have never been rowing before. I can’t teach everything at once, and to see our kids teaching other kids is a cool process.”

Rocking the Boat's roots go back to 1996, when Hostos Community College hired Green to instruct a group of 12 high-school students in how to build a Whitall, over the course of an academic year. The project gave students a fun after-school and Saturday forum for learning teamwork, measurement and physics. Because of logistical conflicts, Green and Hostos parted ways, leaving Green on the lookout for a new port to call home.

For the next two years, he searched for a community-based sponsor to help reactivate his stalled program. In 1998, he partnered with an unlikely ally—New Settlement Apartments, which manages 900 apartments and provides a range of social services in the South Bronx, including youth internships and summer-volunteer opportunities on The Clearwater: folk singer Pete Seeger's sloop on the upper Hudson. “Our neighborhood is mainly concrete,” New Settlement's executive director Jack Doyle says, “so getting young people to recognize that we should have access to water is significant.”

New Settlement gave Green workshop space in the basement of one of its buildings and hired him as a staff member. Two years later, New Settlement negotiated a lease for Rocking the Boat, at a 174th Street storefront. In 2001, Rocking the Boat became an independent non-profit.

In addition to its flagship boatbuilding program, Rocking the Boat has expanded to include courses in on-river education (habitat monitoring, restoration and environmental science). Each semester, Rocking the Boat hires four to six former students to stay on as paid shop apprentices, who serve as liaisons between the students and the staff.

As the good word about Rocking the Boat continues to spread, so does its influence. Last year, the New York Harbor School, a public school in Bushwick, Brooklyn, tapped Green to weave boatbuilding into its curriculum; the city pays Rocking the Boat for the city's ecologically revitalization projects.

For more information, visit rockingtheboat.org or call 718-466-5799. The Amazing Bronx River Boat Flotilla is Saturday 24. See listings for details.