

At Rocking the Boat, Kids Build Boats and Boats Build Kids

SARA CLEMENCE PHOTOS BY JOAQUIN COTTEN

The boats are small, but they have big names. There is Tenacity. There is Triumph. Audacity, launched this spring, is the 30th vessel to come out of the workshop. The 14-foot Whitehall rowboat — a common sight in New York Harbor two centuries ago — was built from a 265-year-old white oak that grew in the New York Botanical Garden before it blew down in a storm last August. Audacity is a luxury model, complete with hand-carved footrests and built-in storage. Painted on the bow is a shark's mouth zig-zagged with huge teeth.

Yet the most unusual thing about the boat may be who made it: a group of kids in the South Bronx, NY. They are part of Rocking the Boat, a small and unusual organization in Hunts Point that teaches local teenagers how to build traditional boats by hand, in the process teaching them about teamwork, potential, achievement and much more.

Daniel Martinez Patino, 18, remembers being nervous when he joined the organization — especially about introducing himself to a group. Today, he is more outgoing. "I feel comfortable and loved," Patino says. "I feel like I met another side of myself, one that I never knew existed. Now, all I dream about is sailing." Rocking the Boat started in 1998 with a dozen students and the plans for one boat. Today, it serves 3,000 people a year. "We started off using wooden boats as a way of turning kids onto their own possibilities," says Adam Green, Rocking the Boat's founder and executive director. "To help them stand out in their own minds. Connect what they were doing in school to real life. That hasn't changed at all."

What has changed is the scope of operations. The organization now educates public school students about environmental science, performs environmental monitoring and restoration projects on the Bronx River, prepares past students for the working world with an apprenticeship program, takes kids on boating adventures around the New York area, and teaches local residents about the river with free community rowing programs each summer.

Some of what students learn at Rocking the Boat is obvious. Students who use the boats on the water are taught maritime skills, swimming and CPR/First Aid. They engage in environmental restoration and monitoring projects for environmental groups such as the Bronx River Alliance, the New York Audubon Society, and the New York City Parks Department, learning about ecology and pollution, and honing their math and science abilities.

But other lessons are more subtle. Each semester, students in the boatbuilding program choose what kind of boat to build, what features it will have, what color it will be, and what it will be named. In the spring, the students wanted to build a Whitehall — a Cape Cod Oyster Skiff, a bateau, a colonial river ferry, and a Rangeley Lakes Boat are among the other designs that have been completed — but wanted it to be more comfortable, with water seats and storage. "They learn how to make decisions, to collaborate, to come up with a vision," Green explains. "Then they have to take that vision and cross it with the reality of what's possible." Summer boatbuilding students get immersed in history, working at Philipsburg Manor Upper Mills, a living history museum operated by Historic Hudson Valley in Sleepy Hollow, NY. Dressed in period costume, they use hand tools to complete a boat in just six weeks, all the while helping to tell the story of the community slaves who operated a milling and trading complex in the 18th Century. "This summer we are building a boat that would have been applicable about 100 years later — an iceboat. It's basically a big sled with a sail, and it is going to be really cool," Green enthuses.



After the boat is finished, the group takes off for a weeklong boating trip. This year, almost 50 kids will row and sail to Calf Island, just off of Greenwich, CT in Long Island Sound, going from Hunts Point east to SUNY Maritime, then Orchard Beach, then the island, camping along the way. "We're trying to show kids that they don't have to go very far away to find new opportunities and have adventures," Green says. "There are parallels in their lives: You have all the power and wisdom you need within you." Sometimes Rocking the Boat teaches by accident. For years, the organization operated out of a storefront in the Mount Eden section of the Bronx, conducting water-based programs from a set of trailers and shipping containers parked near the water at Hunts Point Riverside Park. This spring saw the completion of a new, 6,000-square-foot building complete with an environmental lab, 3,000-square-foot boatshop and spacious kitchen — where kids have access to healthy food choices, and are learning to eat better as a result.

Green, a New York native, did not foresee that when the building was planned. Much less did he envision it when he launched Rocking the Boat thanks to a transformative experience volunteering at a Harlem charter school in 1995. Working on the Hudson River Sloop Clearwater, the boat that folk musician Pete Seeger built to educate the public about environmental issues, he met a teacher from the since-closed East Harlem Maritime School. Green asked if he could volunteer during a semester off from Vassar College. "We built a little 8-foot dinghy from scratch in a pool in the basement of the school," he says. "I saw how fun, powerful and memorable it was for the kids. It made them feel special."

Green started applying for grants to create a boatbuilding program. "There was a question on the first application that asked for the 'name of the project.' I didn't have one," he recalls. "And then one of my roommates said, 'Hey Adam, you rock the boat!' " He didn't end up getting the grant, but decided to go ahead with the idea anyway and managed to convince Hostos Community College in the South Bronx to hire him to teach an after-school program in wooden boatbuilding for high school students. In six months, Green and his students had built their first 14-foot Whitehall. They launched it in the Harlem River that summer to great fanfare — and coverage by The New York Times and CNN. With that experience under his belt and the beginnings of a good reputation, he was able to raise the money to get Rocking the Boat off the ground the following year.

"What I'm trying to accomplish is giving kids this kernel of possibility," Green says. "The knowledge that when they were at Rocking the Boat they were able to create something beautiful that really worked." It is an experience that the kids remember into adulthood. Green recently received an email from one of his old students at East Harlem Maritime School. "I still have the magazine clipping with my photo in it," the student wrote. "I remember that day like the back of my hand and it was over ten years ago. I remember building the boat. I remember trying it out in the pool at school. You...were the greatest. Thanks a bunch." Sara Clemence is Vice President of the board of Rocking the Boat. Joaquin Cotten is Rocking the Boat's Art Director (and a graduate of the program).

Help By Rocking Manhattan

Kids aren't the only ones who have boating adventures at Rocking the Boat. On September 25, volunteers are committing to row 26-foot wooden boats 28.5 miles around Manhattan Island to raise money for the organization. The journey starts at Pier 40 on the Hudson River, and ends with a party in the same place. You can help make waves by signing up to row or making a donation big or small. Just visit rockingtheboat.org.



Many hands make light work as a boat nears completion in Rocking the Boat's new workshop.



Young boatbuilders prepare to launch Audacity, the 30th boat constructed from scratch in Rocking the Boat's After-school Boatbuilding Program.