

YOUR NEIGHBORHOOD

METRO

Bx. kids learning to rock the boat

Class teaches ancient art of shipbuilding

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Meliza Pena peers from behind a white mask at the inside of the wooden boat and runs her fingers over a rough edge.

Her brow furrowed in concentration, she grasps an electric sander and grinds down the extra epoxy bubbling from between the wooden planks. When she rechecks it, a look of satisfaction crosses her face.

It's smooth.

"Never in a million years would I have thought that I would be building a boat," the 17-year-old senior from William Howard Taft High School said.

"My friends used to make fun of me. They would say, 'Yeah, right, you're making a boat in the Bronx. Where're you going to row it?'"

Honoring the past

Pena is one of a dozen students who gather after school at a nondescript storefront sandwiched between an empty lot and a tire shop on E. 174th St. in Mount Eden to learn the ancient

craft of shipbuilding.

With the noise of cars zooming past on the nearby Cross Bronx Expressway, the tiny, landlocked workshop seems an unlikely place for nautical creations.

The kids are taught by Adam Green, 28, a social worker with a love for the water and city kids. Green was the boyfriend and co-worker of Amy Watkins, who was stabbed to death in a 1999 Brooklyn robbery.

Green said his class, which he calls Rocking the Boat, allows him to remain close to Watkins' memory while continuing the volunteer work they shared.

"The kids learn that they can make things work, and if something is given to them or dealt to them, they don't have to just accept it," he said.

Rocking the Boat consists of two boatbuilding sessions per year, coinciding with the fall and spring semesters, and a summer rowing class. A dozen kids attended the program this semester. Working in two groups, they come to the storefront shop twice a week.

On Fridays, the students take to the Bronx River in one of the four boats previous students made.

The boats that Green's students build are Whitehalls, a traditional New York Harbor rowboat used during the 18th and 19th centuries.

"Whitehalls were the only traditional small boat to be used in New York City and New York Harbor," Green said. "And I wanted to build something that was out of our culture and out of our past."

On a recent afternoon, rock music blared from a boom box in one corner of the sawdust-filled workshop as five students tilted over a 17-foot-long, as-yet-unnamed boat. Some used a

bandsaw to cut boards for the floors of the boat, while others sanded planks already in place.

"You can take pieces of wood out of scrap and make it into something," 18-year-old Amaury Almonte said as he sanded.

Green first got the idea of teaching urban kids to build boats six years ago. An avid carpenter, Green found himself volunteering at the defunct East Harlem Maritime School, building an 8-foot dinghy with junior high school kids.

"Adam has always been focused on the children," said Paul Pennoyer, Green's supervisor at East Harlem. "The amount of time that he puts in is incredible. He's a great role model."

Finding comfort

Green said the program, now sponsored by New Settlement Apartments, a Bronx community center and housing organization that revitalizes buildings in the area, will soon become an independent, not-for-profit organization.

The boat that has been under construction since March will be christened and launched next month. It will join a fleet of boats kept at Hunts Point's Riverside Park. Their names include La Bella, Tenacity, Eclipse and the Amy Watkins.

The last boat's name is a source of mixed emotions for Green, especially since the Watkins case has resurfaced in the news in recent months. In May, David Jamison was convicted of Watkins' murder and received 25 years to life. Last week, the trial of alleged lookout Felix Rodriguez began.

But Green said naming a boat for Watkins provides a measure of comfort.

"It totally keeps her spirit alive," Green said. "I'm sure she would be very excited about it."



MICHAEL SCHWARTZ

SAILING ALONG Showing off boat are (clockwise from bottom left) Meliza Pena, Eliyaas Carter, assistant director Beva Geguez, Adam Green, Edmanuel Roman, Tracy Jonson, Amaury Almonte. Below, Green shows Almonte how to install steam-bent oak frame.

