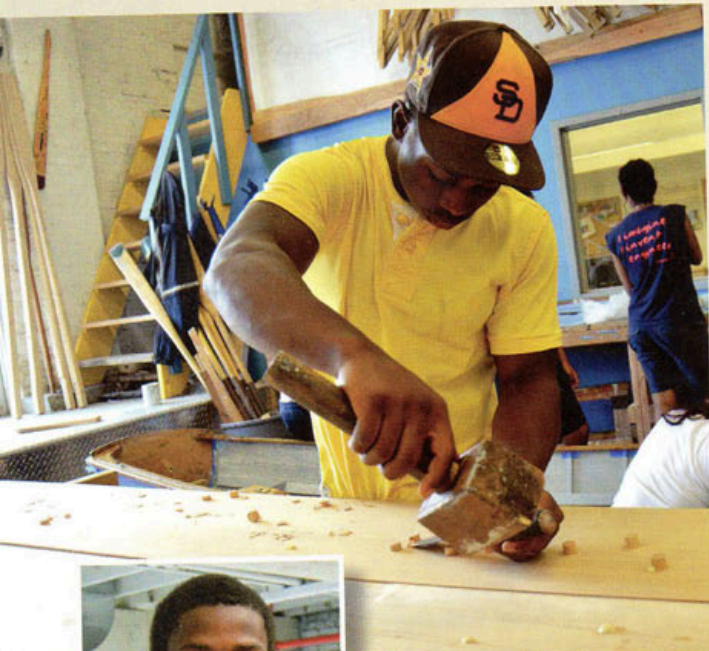


# Building boats,

## Bronx high schoolers learn life

by Sara Clemence



Sekou Kroma, above and left, spoke little English when he signed up for Rocking the Boat. The program gave him a group of friends, a purpose, and boatbuilding skills with which he earns money.

**T**he South Bronx may be the last place one would associate with handmade wooden boats. Yet head to the industrial neighborhood of Hunts Point, hard by the world's largest food distribution center, right next to the metal recycling facility, and down the street from the concrete supplier.

In a well-lit workshop you will find a klatch of local kids building boats piece by piece — cutting, bending, planing, sanding. And, as the motto of youth development organization Rocking the Boat goes, you'll find that boats are building kids.

Rocking the Boat was founded by native New Yorker Adam Green. In 1996, while volunteering at a Harlem school, he saw how students were transformed by building a wooden dinghy together. A few years later, he established Rocking the Boat as an independent non-profit — and its impact has expanded dramatically since.

Wooden boatbuilding is still at the heart of the organization; each year dozens of Bronx teenagers participate in after-school and summer programs where they learn to create traditional vessels from scratch. Rocking the Boat

started with the Whitehall rowboat, but in the last decade students have built 19 different kinds of craft, including dories, catboats, kayaks, and an ice boat.

They use them too. Young people in Rocking the Boat's On-Water Program learn rowing, sailing, and other maritime skills on the nearby Bronx River. They work on environmental monitoring and restoration projects on this historically polluted waterway, surveying bird populations, monitoring water quality and even cultivating mussels and oysters. On weekends, Rocking the Boat offers free rowing trips to the public.

It should be little surprise to boat lovers that Rocking the Boat's programs don't just teach practical skills, but also teamwork, goal-setting, confidence, communication, and much more. Here are three stories of how old boats have changed a new generation of kids.

### From outsider to insider

When he first came to Rocking the Boat, says 17-year-old Sekou Kromah, "I didn't know I liked boats. All I knew was that I wanted to do something different with my life."

Back then, in 2009, he spoke barely a word of English. Sekou was born in Liberia, on the western coast of Africa, and grew up in nearby Guinea. When he was four years old, his father left to work in the U.S., first in a store and then as a taxi driver. "We spent

10 years not seeing each other," Sekou says.

"We talked on the phone. I knew I was talking to my father, but I didn't know his face."

Sekou, his mother, two sisters, and brother were lucky enough to get green cards a few years ago, but coming to New York was a lonely transition for him. The three months he spent in a local middle school were especially challenging. "Kids would bother you, bully you, they'll do anything to fight with you," he recalls. "Every day, every day." Because Sekou didn't speak English, he had few friends and spent a lot of time at home watching television.

High school was an improvement, as there were kids who spoke different languages, including French — and



# building kids

skills from the keel up

he was introduced to Rocking the Boat. His class participated in a week-long summer program before his freshman year, learning to row, checking water quality, and enjoying the water. "Back to my country, I didn't like to be in the house," Sekou says. He jumped at the chance to apply for the fall boatbuilding program.

For the first few months, he barely understood anything — not just what was being said, but exactly what they were doing. Still, he loved working with his hands and within six months was speaking enough English to begin to understand boat construction. "We start with the keel, and then a few weeks you see the shape of the boat coming," he says. "It was like magic, it just came out of nowhere."

The gregarious teen has plenty of friends now, he says. But he's careful not to let socializing get in the way of getting work done. Sekou especially likes to make oars, in part because they go relatively quickly, but also because he loves to row. "And I love putting the frames inside the boat, forming them," he says. "I used to do everything fast, but I learned that you have to go carefully, because they can break."

Today, Sekou is a Rocking the Boat Job Skills Apprentice who is paid to learn advanced skills while repairing Rocking the Boat's fleet of wooden boats and building new boats for outside clients. He's part of the team building a 29-foot whaleboat for the *Charles W. Morgan*, a 19th century whaling ship that the Mystic Seaport Museum will relaunch



As a member of the On-Water Program, Emily Martinez, above and left, learned to row and sail and studies marine life in and around the Bronx River alongside professional scientists. Tenacity is just one of the traits encouraged in the boatbuilding shop, below.

in 2014. "It's very complicated," he says. "But the boat we're building, it feels like it was my project. I think we made 86 frames and I got to work on every one."

## Learning to love Mondays

"I used to hate Mondays," says Emily Martinez, a 17-year-old junior at East Bronx Academy for the Future.

The start of the school week was always daunting — not because academics were a problem, but socializing was. "I used to be a really closed-in person," she says. "I would only want to fly under the radar."

Last year, Rocking the Boat paid a recruiting visit to her school; Emily was interested right away. "I thought, 'You get to go out on a river? On boats?'" she recalls. Though she lives with her mother and brother near the Bronx Zoo, she had never heard of the Bronx River and wondered





Natividad Lopez, above and left, likes the safe atmosphere she finds in the Boatbuilding Program at Rocking the Boat. It's apparent from the smiles that others in the program find the water a pleasant retreat from the gritty streets of the Bronx, below.

whether it would be grim and polluted. But she joined the On-Water Program, and was surprised to see what was in her backyard. She was even more startled at the calm, supportive environment.

"In the Bronx if you're on the street, people will glare at you," she says. "If you look at them the wrong way, they get mad at you. You can say hi to anyone here and they'll be friendly."

Emily discovered a passion for rowing and sailing, but struggled to connect. At the end of the second term, she decided she would make a major effort . . . and blossomed. "Now it's so easy for me to go up to a new person and say hi, introduce myself," she says. Last summer, she went on a four-day sailing camping trip with Rocking the Boat, sharing a tent with three other girls. "They're closer to me than some of my family right now," she says.

She has become an Environmental Job Skills Apprentice and works on projects like growing oysters, mussels, and seaweed with professional environmental scientists and marine biologists. Emily has also developed big ambitions. "When I first came here, I'd never swum in deep water before," she says. "Now I want to go to the bottom

of a glacier and swim. I'm afraid of heights, but I want to skydive. Even if something might scare me, I go for it."

And those Mondays? "It's what I look forward to," she says. "Even if it's Friday."

### A test of success

"Lazy" is how Natividad Lopez describes herself pre-Rocking the Boat.

The 16-year-old sophomore has a sweet demeanor with a street edge, and goes by the nickname Nati. When she learned about Rocking the Boat and was given a choice between the On-Water Program and Boatbuilding, there was no question which she would pick.





Students at Rocking the Boat have built 19 different types of watercraft over the last decade, and they get to use them, at right. As well as building and maintaining the organization's boats, apprentices in the Boatbuilding Program build boats for outside clients.

"I used to build things with my father when I was younger," she says. "Birdhouses, chairs. I always liked tools, so I decided I'm going to build boats."


Nati lives in the Parkchester neighborhood of the Bronx with six other family members — her mother, stepfather, brother, two sisters and a stepsister. Her father now lives in Maryland, and she doesn't see him often, she says.

"Before, I used to, like, be lazy," Nati admits. But at the end of each day, Rocking the Boat students have to clean up their workspaces.

"The days I don't have Rocking the Boat, I've noticed that when it hits 7 o'clock, I'm cleaning something or washing the dishes. I'm used to being organized."

This spring, Nati was working on a 14-foot semi-dory sailboat designed by John Gardner, putting on planks, installing seats, sanding, and painting alongside two dozen other students. *Current* launched in June as Rocking the Boat's 10th sailboat.

"The best thing is when you actually get to test the boat on the water to see how well you built it," Nati says. "If there's no water inside the boat, you did it right."

But she is keenly aware that Rocking the Boat isn't just a place to sand and hammer and use science and math. "It's a very safe place," Nati says. "If I'm stressed out, there's someone I can talk to. Even if you make a mistake, they won't scream at you and say, 'Oh my God, you made a mistake!' They will say, 'OK, let's fix it.'" 

*Sara Clemence is a writer and editor who serves as vice president of the board of Rocking the Boat. She grew up racing sailboats on Long Island Sound.*



The Bronx River, tucked into the shoreline at the head of Long Island Sound, might not have the cachet of other bodies of water in the region but it's a source of recreation and education for a dedicated group of high schoolers.

