

# Rocking the Boat



If you get out of the subway in the Bronx, walk through the dark cement underpass covered in graffiti and littered with broken glass, and continue along next to the rushing traffic of the Cross Bronx Expressway, you will find an unlikely oasis: the colorful workshop of Rocking the Boat, where a group of dedicated teenagers are hand-crafting traditional New York Whitehall rowboats.

Adam Green, 28, is the founder of Rocking the Boat, an after-school and summer program based in the Mount Eden neighborhood of the Bronx, that teaches inner-city high school students to build boats and to appreciate the environment and natural history of New York City.

"I think it's a great program, it's very unique. You don't hear about boat-building programs for teenagers, especially in the South Bronx", said 16 year-old Joaquin Cotten, resting his hand on the keel. "We've learned all about the specific craft of boat-building, but also a lot about life. It's about teamwork and improving your social skills, and how to solve problems rather than ignore them."

The seeds of Rocking the Boat were planted in 1996, when Green began a volunteer project at the East Harlem Maritime School to build an 8-foot dingy



using plans from a magazine. The maiden voyage was in the pool in the basement of the school. Since then, Green has made boat building his full-time job, running on a \$200,000 budget with two full-time employees and a paid apprentice. The students have crafted five boats so far, and they spend their Friday afternoons rowing them on the Bronx River.

Among Green's motivations for starting the program were a commitment to environmentalism, an appreciation of local history and craftsmanship, and above all a desire to expose local teenagers to new experiences beyond the normal urban activities. Besides their Friday trips to the Bronx, the students take winter camping trips, compete in fishing derbies on the Hudson River, and gather wood for their boats on Pete Seeger's property in Dutchess County, New York.

"I want to give them some sense of what their own possibilities are, or what possibilities are within their reach", said Green. "There are skills they can learn and resources they can access that could be very rewarding if they know to look for them." One of these resources is Green's knowledge of historical New York. At Vassar College, he wrote a thesis about the history of storytelling in the Hudson River Valley. His interviews with historians and community elders contributed to his interest in local maritime history. He also taught environmental education and local





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history on the Hudson River Sloop Clearwater, a 106-foot floating classroom. Green chose to make Whitehall boats because of their prominent role in the shipping economy of New York in the 19th century. These sturdy workboats, generally made of oak and mahogany, were first constructed on Whitehall Street in lower Manhattan in the 1820s. By mid-century, they crowded the waters of the Hudson and East Rivers and were common in every major shipping port in America. They ran cargo and passengers from larger ships to shore. They also transported the "Battery Boatmen" who ran a water taxi service, according to Howard Chapelle's *American Sailing and Small Craft*, which Green calls the "bible of boats". The current Whitehall under construction is slowly taking shape. From the sawing of the white oak logs to the final coat of varnish and the naming

ceremony, the building process takes about four months. In October, the boat was just a skeleton. The backbone of the boat, consisting of the inner and outer keels, the stem and stern assemblies, was a 17-foot curved bow that rested upside down on a series of arced moldings. Thin wooden strips called battens, the ribs of the skeleton, show where the final planks will rest.

One afternoon, Edmanuel Roman, 15, knelt on the sawdust-covered floor of the workshop and ran a block plane in rapid thrusts along the mahogany plywood that will become the planks of the hull. To create the 17-foot planks, long enough to run the length of the boat, two sections of plywood had to be joined together. The edges must be scraped down on an angle – or scarfed – so they lie on each other like shoes in a shoebox, creating a long continuous surface.

Roman, one of the more technically skilled students, wants to build houses or "anything that has to do with wood and tools". He is signed up for the Tuesday and Thursday sessions of *Rocking the Boat* but he comes everyday because he lives close and enjoys the work.

"It's a feeling that no one else has but us. Look, I made this and it floats; it's amazing" he says between scarfs.

Across the shop, Michael Merced, 16, worked on transforming an 11-foot block of spruce into a smooth round oar. Alternating between a spoke shave and a block plane he carved off curls of spruce. He checked the width of his oar against his model, a manufactured oar, using a caliper.

"Planing the oars is definitely my favorite part; I like ripping off the wood, making it by hand," Merced says. "I've learned so much here, all about the different tools and what they're used for."

As the days progress, the first plank, or garboard, is attached to the keel with rods and caulking. Each successive plank is fastened with epoxy until the hull is complete.

"Planking is very cool", said 16 year-old Irene Dominguez. "You get to see the layers of the hull go on and you finally know it will really be a boat."

Many students agree that the skills they've learned can be applied to their daily lives. Hector Diaz, 16, has become the handyman around the house, thanks to his woodworking knowledge.





“I have learned that I can look at things in my house and fix them myself. A couple of weeks ago I fixed my bedroom door. It was hard to open, always sticking. I just planed down the side until it opened smoothly.”

The value of practical knowledge is emphasized in this workshop, especially because the educational alternatives available in the local public schools are so dismal. Many of Green’s students attend William Howard Taft High School, which is regarded as one of the worst in New York City. Only 30 percent of the students graduate in four years, and the suspension rate is three times higher than average. Gangs, drugs, and weapons are an unpleasant reality. For many, the time spent at Rocking the Boat could easily be spent in a more unproductive ways.

“If I wasn’t here, I’d just be out on the street chillin’, wasting my time. There’s nothing much to do on the block except get in trouble, and I was tired of always seeing the same bad things happen”, said Craig Salazar, 17, who found out about Rocking the Boat through his sister, a former volunteer.

Meliza Pena, 17, is a senior at Taft and the apprentice at Rocking the Boat. She helps Green supervise the



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Rocking the Boat is always open to donations of any size supporting their worthwhile endeavor. Contact directly Adam Green at 718-466-5799 or email him at [greenad@earthlink.net](mailto:greenad@earthlink.net)



nearly 30 kids involved in the program. She says Green has opened her eyes to more than the art of boat building.

"He's doing a lot for me. He got me into an SAT prep class; he helped me find a better guidance counselor. I wasn't even really thinking about college until I met Adam" she said. "Now I definitely want to go to college and hopefully study law and ecology. I'd like to be a congresswoman. Adam has always said that education comes first."

Students can also get homework help at the workshop. Jaimie Frank, a teacher at Lehman High School, conducts a tutoring program on the futons and beanbags at the back of the shop. Frank has sent eight of her students to Rocking the Boat and raves about the many lessons that can be learned from the program.

"The kids get hands on math experience, hands on science experience, trade experience, physical education, improved motor skills through handling tools. It is suited to many types of intelligences", said Frank.

Amy Kantrowitz, a senior policy analyst at the After-School Corporation, which sponsors many social programs throughout New York City, would like to see schools change to incorporate more hands-on activity.

"There are very few practical consequences of getting a math problem wrong at school. At Rocking the Boat, if your calculations are incorrect, the wood will not fit, the boat won't float. You have an incentive to get the math right." Green often makes the distinction between the abstraction and busy work that students run into at school, and the concrete knowledge that is acquired during boat building. He was never completely fulfilled by academics, and was disappointed that after all the hard work the result was just pieces of paper to be filed away.

"The only issue that I truly care about is that the kids actually enjoy the process of learning more, and care more about themselves" he said. "We are doing something real, something that isn't in theory or abstraction. I'll teach you how to use this tool and you go use it, and the reason you're using it is because we're building a boat. What you do here, this is real life, not so you can pass the test. We have to build a boat and we're going to do it."

After three full years in operation the list of alumni is growing. One former builder, Isaiah Rivera, who attended Rocking the Boat in the fall of 2000, wrote Green a letter that he keeps on hand in his office to remind him of results he's often too close to see.

"I owe a lot of things to the Rocking the Boat program. It helped me finish high school, it gave me something to do and it helped me meet great people", Rivera wrote. "You may not notice but you changed my life for the better and I can't thank you enough for that."

