

Rocking the Boat



Old ways teach kids new life lessons

by Steve Rappaport
Photography by Joaquin Cotten

There was a time not that long ago when a youngster with a sense of adventure could head for the shore and look for a new direction in life. Countless young men went shipping on the deep sea or in coastal waters. Others boarded fishing schooners, and later draggers, bound for the Grand Banks, or signed on to day-fishing boats closer to home. Most found ways to support themselves ashore, often learning trades that would be useful among hundreds of shipyards and boatyards that dotted the coastline. Perhaps just as important, young people learned how to make their way in the world, whether at sea or on land.

It is no secret that the fishing and shipping industries have declined precipitously and represent much smaller

segments of the American economy than they did just a few decades ago. Today, for most kids, especially inner-city kids from disadvantaged backgrounds, the idea of earning a living or learning about life from boats or the water isn't even on the horizon. Most lack an awareness of boats or the sea, and few have any connection with the water that, in a city like New York, surrounds them.

A small organization based deep in the heart of one of New York City's grittiest neighborhoods is working to change that by teaching high school kids to build traditional wooden boats and to use them safely for the environmental restoration of local waterways. The organization is Rocking the Boat. Its goal isn't to train a

Above—Teamwork of the kind required not only to build boats but to move them in tight quarters is one among many skills students learn at Rocking the Boat in New York City. This boat is MOMENTUM, a 16' melonseed skiff built at the school's construction shop at Hunts Point, the Bronx, in 2008.



Every Rocking the Boat launching is worthy of a celebration parade. RANGE, a 19' Rangeley Lakes boat, took a route through Hunts Point Riverside Park to the Bronx River for her launching.

handful of inner-city youths to become apprentices in the boatbuilding industry, but to help as many of those young people as possible learn the skills they need to become successful, productive adults.

"We're building kids. That's what we do," said Adam Green, Rocking the Boat's founder.

Rocking the Boat has its roots in a semester that Green took off during his junior year at Vassar College, a small liberal arts school located in Poughkeepsie in New York's Hudson River Valley. There his studies were focused on folklore and storytelling. Green spent his "semester abroad" as a volunteer at a junior high school in New York City's East Harlem—one of the nation's most economically depressed urban neighborhoods. While there, Green led a group of 10 students who built an 8' wooden dinghy that they eventually launched in the school swimming pool.

A year later, Green was back in East Harlem, New York City, with a bachelor's degree from Vassar and his New York teaching credentials in hand. An after-school program at a local community college in the South Bronx gave him another opportunity to run a boatbuilding program, this time for high school students. By the end of the school year, in the spring of 1997, Green and the students completed what would be Rocking the Boat's first project—a 14' epoxy-and-plywood skiff based on a

Whitehall from one of Mystic Seaport maritime historian John Gardner's books.

Green's qualifications for teaching boatbuilding were scant, but not nonexistent. As a teenager, he worked as a volunteer on the Hudson River sloop CLEARWATER, and after his semester in New York, he "picked up books" on traditional boats and boatbuilding, as he tells it, "and started reading."

During the summer after his college graduation, Green took the first practical step in developing his boatbuilding skills. He came to WoodenBoat School in Brooklin, Maine, and took Bob Elliott's course in dory construction. Most of his fellow students were older than he and already had some boatbuilding skills. The experience was a watershed for him, Green said.

"It was very powerful. I didn't know what I was doing. I realized I was completely ignorant and that there was no reason why I shouldn't be. I learned about boatbuilding, but I also learned about learning."

The results of that learning, and 11 years of experience, are evident in the current operations of Rocking the Boat. Now based in the economically disadvantaged South Bronx, the tax-exempt organization has a 2008 budget of \$1.3 million, and 14 full-time and 10 part-time employees. It relies almost entirely on funding from corporate, government, and foundation donors.

The Boatbuilding Program is currently based in a



What practical purpose is learning to use a jack plane to shape an ash oar? The joy of doing a job right, earning the respect of your peers, knowing the feel of a fine tool, making something that you can hold in your hands and put to work...the list could go long.

Students in the program build boats of traditional design. They use traditional plank-on-frame construction techniques, including fashioning solid-wood backbones and steam-bending frames. The aim isn't to produce a crop of skilled boatbuilders but rather to give kids from difficult backgrounds the opportunity to participate in a process that is educational in its own right and "to create something beautiful and functional from scratch."

"We build traditional boats, but we're not too hung up on them being perfect," Green said "They really are built by the kids, and it's through making mistakes that everyone learns. We try to minimize them, of course."

Building techniques at Rocking the Boat have evolved considerably since Green led the program's first construction of a Whitehall at the Bronx Community College in 1997. His experience with that boat persuaded him that he had some learning to do. He took a year off and worked as an apprentice on the CLEARWATER, and he also returned to WoodenBoat School during the summer of 1999 for a two-week boatbuilding course taught by Greg Rössel. "I had my own tools this time, and I had perspective," Green said.

Although Green started out as Rocking the Boat's chief (and only) instructor, he hasn't actually built a boat since 2005. Instead, he has had to focus on the business of running—and funding—a burgeoning nonprofit organization. "Since then, I've pulled back and concentrated on business. It's exciting, because I'm still very much connected to the kids and the programs."

For the past few years, Rocking the Boat has split its operations between two locations. The office and Boatbuilding Program were based in a storefront on an

1,000-sq-ft shop. During the past decade or so, students have built 24 boats, most of them based on the Whitehall type. But in recent years they have also built a dory, a peapod, a Cape Cod oyster skiff, a Rangeley Lakes boat, a Colonial river ferry, and a melonseed skiff. The one thing these boats share is their historical connection to the kinds of small working craft that once were common in the waters around New York. Still, Green said, "what's driving our design choices" for the boats the program builds "is not history, but our present needs."

The Boatbuilding Program operates two semester-long after-school classes during the school year. Each class is divided into two sections, each with 10 students, that meet twice a week for a total of seven hours. Each class builds a boat from start to finish. There is also a seven-week summer program that pays students a \$575 stipend to work four days a week on the grounds of Philipsburg Manor, a living history museum at a historic house in Sleepy Hollow, a few miles up the Hudson River from New York City. The students dress in 18th-century period costumes and build a traditional boat. The students also participate in a week of outdoor adventure—often sailing on a tall ship—that for many is their first exposure to such activities.

Subjects like geometry that might seem abstract in school suddenly take on real-life meaning when the task at hand is to puzzle out the complicated shape of a stem rabbet or cut the transom bevels for a 14' Whitehall pulling boat.



Putting Boats to Work

The core of Rocking the Boat, according to founder Adam Green, is boatbuilding. But the organization has also developed four other programs serving thousands of inner-city schoolchildren. Although each is independent, they all draw on resources and opportunities afforded by the others:

- The after-school **On-Water Program** enrolls 20 kids each semester. The group is divided into two sections, each spending seven hours, spread over two days, developing maritime skills and working on a variety of environmental restoration projects. A seven-week summer session pays students a \$575 stipend and offers a weeklong outdoor adventure experience.

Using boats built in the Boatbuilding Program, students learn small-boat handling and navigation. They also learn how to swim and are trained in cardiopulmonary resuscitation and first aid. The boats are also used for some environmental restoration projects on the Bronx River—a marshy tributary flowing through a heavily industrialized part of New York City. A few years ago, the river was essentially a dead zone, but today it supports considerable wildlife. Birds, beavers, and fish can all be found along or within its banks—including a population of oysters planted to help purify the water. Students from Rocking the Boat have helped marine scientists plant some of those oysters. They also participate in environmental restoration and monitoring projects in conjunction with scientists in varied disciplines.

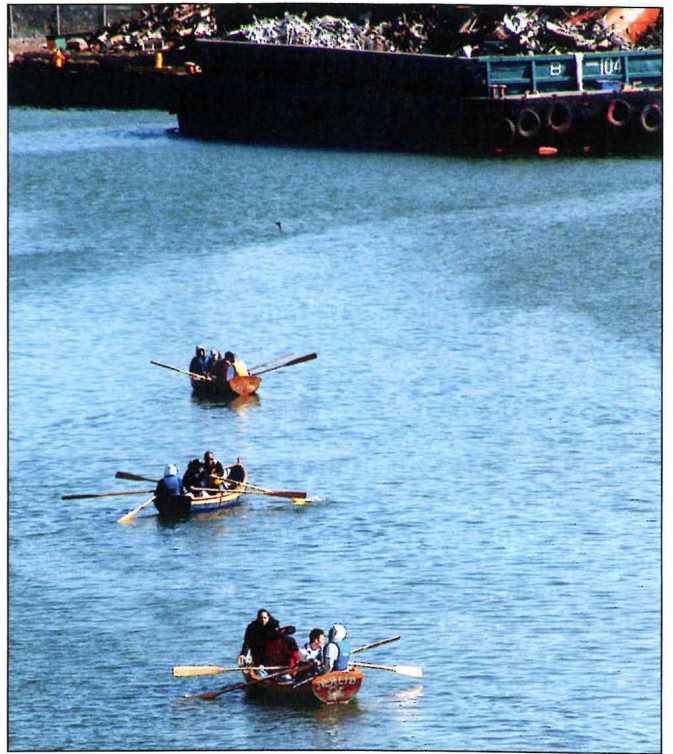
- Initially offered just to high school students, the **On-Water Classroom**, which runs during school hours, was expanded to include middle school students last year, when it served more than 500 kids. That expansion reflects Rocking the Boat's commitment to serving the community where it is located. The Hunts Point neighborhood has two middle schools but no high schools.

Operating in conjunction with classroom teachers, the curriculum is tailored to fit specific needs. The flexibility extends to scheduling as well as content. The focus, though, is to introduce students to maritime skills and to help them connect with the natural environment of the Bronx River.

- **Community Rowing** enables Rocking the Boat to make valuable resources—its boats and its experienced students—available to the larger Hunts Point community. Rocking the Boat gives local residents instruction in rowing and boating safety and teaches them about the social and industrial history of the Bronx River. Members of the neighborhood can participate during scheduled, weekend, and special-occasion sessions.

“The people in Hunts Point that have been looking at the water for years finally got a chance to go out on it,” Green said.

- **Job Skills**, established two years ago, offers a sort of “post-graduate” work for up to 16 students who have completed and excelled in at least two semesters of either the Boatbuilding or On-Water programs. “This is much more intensive,” Green said. “We train the students in technical skills, and help them go out into the world as successful adults.”



Rocking the Boat's small craft become on-the-water tools for everything from community rowing to school environmental classes. This flotilla rowed the Bronx River past one of New York City's largest metal and plastics recycling yards.

Students enrolled in Job Skills are considered apprentices, are paid at least minimum wage, and may stay in the program for up to two years. Boatbuilding apprentices help maintain the Rocking the Boat fleet, and in addition some boatbuilding commissions may be generated as a fundraising tool. Environmental restoration apprentices work with scientists involved in projects on the Bronx River and serve as environmental educators in the On-Water Classroom and Community Rowing programs.

Particularly outstanding participants in the Job Skills program—up to 10 a year who have shown exceptional leadership or communication skills—have the opportunity to become program assistants at Rocking the Boat. As paid, part-time employees, the program assistants serve as instructors and leaders during the school year and summer classes.

As important as the technical education available in the Job Skills program is, perhaps even more important is the support program participants receive from the Job Skills advocate. This staff member serves as guidance counselor, career counselor, and mentor to students in the program. Similar services are available to students in the Boatbuilding and On-Water programs through a student advocate.

Both advocates focus on helping students in Rocking the Boat programs to achieve the organization's core goal—becoming successful, productive adults. The student advocate focuses on helping students stay, and succeed, in school and in teaching them life skills they may not have opportunities to learn elsewhere. Job advocates work with Job Skills apprentices and program assistants, introducing them to college and employment opportunities and helping them acquire the fundamentals—how to interview for a job, how to behave as an employee—they will need after leaving Rocking the Boat. —SR

Recognizing boatbuilding as one way to bring important life lessons to inner-city students, Executive Director Adam Green founded Rocking the Boat in New York City in 1997.

urban street five miles from the water. The organization also has four other programs with environmental, community, and job skills emphases (see sidebar), all of which were based at a community center site on the banks of the Bronx River in the Hunts Point section of the Bronx.

Late last spring, the organization signed a 10-year lease on a 6,000-sq-ft warehouse adjacent to the Hunts Point center site. By this fall, Green said, all of Rocking the Boat's facilities should be consolidated under one roof. That "tremendous step in our development" will make life much easier for Green and the organization's administrative staff.

"The biggest challenge now is running operations in two places," Green said in March. "It's incredibly challenging. We built the program out to full scale in a makeshift way. Now we're getting the space to maintain what we're doing."

According to Green, 70 students participate in the Boatbuilding Program each year. While boatbuilding is central to the organization's four other programs, it directly serves only a fraction of the kids reached by the On-Water and the related On-Water Classroom




environmental programs. Rocking the Boat serves students from four of New York City's five boroughs and who represent Latino, African-American, West Indian, Indian, Asian, South American, and African cultures. Although the organization uses the boats it builds in its other programs, Green stressed that that isn't the reason for building them.

"We're not trying to build wooden boats to clean up the Bronx River," Green said. "Those are our tools to encourage young people to become responsible adults." Through its boatbuilding and other programs, Rocking the Boat "is trying to do the work that hasn't been accomplished at school, and oftentimes at home, for so many of these kids," Green said. One reason the programs work so well, Green added, is that "the only reason anyone is there is because they want to be."

Eventually, all students leave Rocking the Boat, but where they wind up may not have anything to do with boats or environmental issues.

"The kids we're working with are incredibly committed, but not necessarily looking to become wooden boat builders," Green said. "Many of them are shy and not ready to leave the Bronx. They still need a level of support and guidance." Rocking the Boat tries to offer that guidance, but Green said it doesn't try to "push" kids in any specific direction. Instead, the lessons are designed to "expose kids to a whole wide range of things" so that they can pursue whatever direction they want.

Green said that Rocking the Boat's students leave with the realization that they might very well have more of a future than a dead-end life on the streets of the South Bronx. When students move on, Green said, they do so believing, "If I can build a boat, I can do anything." 

Stephen Rappaport, an experienced sailor and boat owner, writes about a wide range of marine issues from East Blue Hill, Maine.

There's nothing quite like the thrill of launching a boat you've built with your own hands. Like the boat itself, there's no telling where the skills these students learn at Rocking the Boat may take them after launching.