

THE HUNTS POINT *Express*

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TREASURED ISLAND

Teens seek to rescue wildlife, page 12.



Photo by Adam Leibowitz

THANKS TO HEATHER MILLS



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Teens make voyage of discovery

Help comes to North Brother Island, long off-limits

With funds from a Venezuelan oil company, young residents are restoring a natural habitat damaged by invasive plants

By Azriel James Relph
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Gliding into the East River from Barretto Point Park in the gray light of a recent early morning, four boats set off for a destination only a handful of New Yorkers have ever visited.

The Myriad, Essence, Phoenix and Pride—classic wooden rowboats, handmade by students from Rocking the Boat—carried a band of teens and their mentors to the rugged shores of North Brother Island, where giant “Restricted Area” signs loom over rusted antique wheelbarrows and 30-year-old beer bottles.

“I was pretty scared,” said 17-year old Kyeesha Fountain. “It was my first time on a boat.” But she was not dissuaded. “Not many people get to go there,” she said, “so I was like ‘Yes! We’re making history!’”

Abandoned and off-limits to the public for nearly half a century, North Brother’s landscape is a tangle of vines that climb over the dilapidated remains of the 19th-century hospital that once occupied the island and entwine themselves around its trees.

Now it is the site of an ambitious effort to enlist local teens to save those trees and other native plants from being strangled by the vines, and to ensure a safe haven for the largest nesting ground in the Northeast for herons and egrets, whose numbers have been shrinking in recent years.

Funded by a grant from CITGO, the American arm of the Venezuelan National Petroleum Corporation, the teenage members of ACTION (Activists Coming To Inform Our Neighborhood) and Rocking the Boat, are working to restore the island to a healthy and balanced ecosystem.

The island once housed the hospital where Typhoid Mary spent the last two decades of her life, and where over 1,000 people spent their own last moments in 1904, when the steamer General Slocum caught fire and ran aground there. The wreck of the excursion ship claimed more lives than any disaster in the city’s history, until September 11, 2001.

The island later served as a base for military housing and a drug rehabilitation center, before it was closed to the public completely in the early 1960s. Vines and trees now shroud the buildings.

“It’s technically the Bronx, but it is a completely different place,” said 16-year old Misra Walker. “You get almost like a Twilight Zone feeling there. You can see all the trees from the Bronx, but



Photo by Adam Liebowitz

Plants are encroaching on the remains of the nineteenth century hospital on North Brother Island.

when you get there and see all the old buildings and artifacts, it is just a crazy place.”

New York has been an inviting place for foreign nationals, but immigrant plant life is not always welcome. The mission on North Brother Island is to curb the growth of species like English Ivy, Asiatic Bittersweet and Norway Maple—whose names are dead-giveaways to their foreign origins.

None of these plants were meant to be in the area, and some of them are extremely hostile to native species. The Kudzu vine for instance, comes from sub-tropical Asia. It can grow up to 20 feet in one season, and will twist around smaller trees, choking them to death.

Birds carry the seeds to nesting areas like North Brother where rising temperatures have allowed the invasive plants to gain a foothold, according to Rich Love of the New York City Department of Parks and Recreation’s Natural Resources Group.

The foreign species compete with na-

tive plants for sunlight, water and soil on the small island. Experts believe their invasion may be responsible for the recent decline in the number of birds nesting on North Brother.

“We can’t be entirely sure what conditions are causing the birds to nest here less,” said NYC Audubon’s Erik Karff, but “we need to carefully take what measures we can to enhance nesting.”

Over the past four years the Natural Resources Group has been clearing areas on the island to plant natives like Gray Birch, Ash, Dogwood and Sycamore, which are all fast growing and good for bird-nesting. However, the cleared areas are already being swamped anew by the intrepid invasive species, so the help of the South Bronx teens couldn’t have come at a better time.

“A lot of bird species go there that you would never see anywhere else,” said 14-year old Victor Davilla. “The native plants that most of these species of birds feed on are getting killed by these other plants.”

Representatives from the Natural Resources Group and NYC Audubon guided the members of ACTION and Rocking the Boat through the overgrown island, helping them identify areas of concern. The teens worked to remove plants that threaten to overtake the island, by digging up and hacking off their roots with tools they referred to as “loppers.”

“We’re getting rid of the invasive plants, and saving the plants that the birds like to eat and nest in,” explained 13-year old Kendrick Martinez.

“It’s important because we are saving the environment and something can start from here, just by helping out,” said 16-year old Jon Ortiz.

Seventeen-year old Dave Odon described the importance of their mission, saying “even though I’m just chopping trees, I’m actually doing something positive for the community and I’m learning something, instead of just hanging out.”

“What we do is important, and people should know that we are involved in our own community,” said Walker. “I hear all about how Hunts Point is growing and has so much potential. It’d be nice to have more people who wanted to join us, do work, get down and dirty and help out.”

This island is for the birds

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Venezuelan gift sparks controversy

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North Brother's guardians say 'This island is for the birds'

By Azriel James Relph
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Sycomore trees and egrets are not the only beneficiaries of the North Brother Island Initiative. The project gave 24 teens from ACTION and Rocking the Boat the chance to experience nature and history without ever leaving the South Bronx.

The North Brother Island Initiative is not only intended to rehabilitate the island for native plant species and birds, but also to enrich the teens' lives as they learn about the history and ecology of their community.

The teens in ACTION are paid for their work. First semester students earn a bi-weekly stipend of \$75, which can go up to \$125 by their third semester. Instead of being forced to settle for the menial jobs that most 15- or 16-year-olds have to accept, they can participate in work that can lead to college or to a good job, explained Adam Liebowitz, program director of ACTION, which is based at The Point.

"If your parents are well off, you can spend your extracurricular time on enrichment activities and cool after school stuff, but if you're of low income, you don't get that extra enrichment. By offering an incentive we can give opportunities to those kids expected to contribute, and we use it as job training," Liebowitz continued.

Likewise, the students from Rocking the Boat learn job skills through maritime activities. They build and operate boats and learn science by studying the river, opening opportunities for future jobs or education.

All of the teens found the experience enlightening, though their impressions of the great outdoors differed.

"Being on the water was so peaceful and nice. It's something you don't usually see here. I just had to stare out onto the water for a bit there," said 16-year old Jenny Menna.

Seventeen-year old Kyeesha Fountain however, hoped their work would ensure that the city's natural and urban



Photo by Adam Liebowitz

Tatianna Echevarria, left, and Tafianni Watson attack invasive plants.

areas remain healthy and separate. "I'm scared of birds, so it was good to help them out so they can stay there, because we do not need them flying towards the Bronx," she declared.

If there was one lesson that all of the teens learned, it was that there is more to the South Bronx than meets the eye. They all agreed that more residents of Hunts Point should become aware of North Brother Island so that they can keep it from being exploited.

"People in Hunts Point should know what they didn't know, that there is an island in the back of the neighborhood. A lot of people just know about the grocery store around the corner, but there is a lot of history here," said 17-year old Dave Odon.

"People should learn the history. I went to Barnes and Nobles and couldn't

find a book on North Brother Island," added Walker.

"I'd heard of a Typhoid Mary as an expression, but I never knew it came from right here," said 14-year old Victor Davilla.

An island with so much history got the members of ACTION thinking about its future.

"The more people find out about it, the more they will want to go there. The more humans go there, it gets dangerous for the animals," worried Menna.

Davilla summed up the feelings of most of the teens; "I just hope nobody tries to turn it into apartments or houses. I hope it stays a sanctuary for birds."

"People don't need to go there. If you want to go to an island, you can always go on vacation in the Bahamas or Hawaii," advised Menna.

Venezuelan gift sparks controversy

By Azriel James Relph
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The funding for the North Brother Island Initiative did not fall from the sky. It came from somewhere perhaps just as unlikely, one of the United States' most vocal critics, President Hugo Chavez of Venezuela.

The initiative began with a grant from CITGO, the American arm of the Venezuelan National Petroleum Corporation, announced in a full-page ad in the New York Times on Sept. 26, 2007 that proclaimed, "Venezuela and The Bronx: Building a Bridge of Solidarity for the People."

All told, CITGO distributed \$4 million to various South Bronx social development and environmental groups, including The Point, Rocking the Boat and Youth Ministries for Peace and Justice.

Chavez first visited Hunts Point in 2005, when CITGO delivered discounted heating oil to South Bronx residents.

While the money earned him praise, it also sparked criticism from people who warned they were the propaganda efforts of an antagonistic autocrat.

Chavez has called the United States an "evil empire" and "terrorist state." He maintains close ties to the Revolutionary Armed Forces of Columbia (FARC), which the State Department characterizes as the largest terrorist organization

in Latin America.

His beneficiaries shrug the criticism off. "We're a non-profit. From our point of view, money is money," said Adam Liebowitz, program director of ACTION, which is based at The Point.

While most of the groups that the oil company grant funded used the money to keep their regular programs operating, The Point directed its money to ACTION to start a brand-new program, and raised additional funds to augment the CITGO grant.

"There was always a desire to have part of ACTION be environmental work," said Liebowitz. "This was the opportunity to do that, and the closest natural habitat we have are the islands."

from Scotland to France, from the South Bronx to Peru). If interested in submitting a print, guidelines are as follows: Original fine art prints are eligible. Digital prints, photocopies etc. will not be accepted. All prints must adhere to the 6"x9", 10"x10", 5"x7" or 8"x10" paper size. Work is non-juried but Studio 889 reserves the right to reject unsuitable work. Price of artwork cannot exceed \$125.00. Five-dollar entry fee for up to three print pieces. Studio 889 receives 25 percent commission. Deadline is November 22. Contact: studio889@gmail.com for more info and application. For applications contact: Alejandra C. Delfin, Executive Director, 889 Hunts Point Avenue, Bronx New York 10474 Phone: 718.620.2824 Fax 718.620.2810 Mailing address: PO Box 740190 | Bronx, NY 10474
November 22-Art work submission deadline for artists wishing to submit their artworks for Studio 889's second annual holiday print show. The show is set to begin on December 6 and run through January 10.

Photography Exhibit Through December

■ Surprisingly Natural: The Nature of the Bronx
Bronx River Art Center, 1807 East Tremont Avenue, 718-589-5819
Lehman College Art Gallery, Bedford Park Boulevard/Paul Ave, 718-960-8731
Wave Hill, 675 W. 252 St. 718-549-3200
Call each site for specific dates and times.

Local Artist Exhibits Through December 31

Studio 889 @ The Market Kitchen
405 Hunts Point Avenue, tel. 718 328 6500
Monday - Friday 10a.m. - 3p.m. Saturday 10 a.m.-2 p.m. Admission: Free

Classes

Building Methods Sustainable South Bronx Fees: Free

■ Classes in various building methods using state-of-the-art computer equipment will be held at SSBX's Fablab, located at Hunts Point Riverside Park. Contact Jon Santiago at 646-400-5436, or email Jon at jsantiago@ssbx.org for dates and other details.

Mayaguez Style Bomba Dance for beginners, intermediate, or advanced.

The Point CDC, 940 Garrison Ave. See www.myspace.com/bambularaiz, or call 718-200-9361 Saturdays 3-5 p.m. Fees: \$20 per class, \$10 for registration.

Self Defense for children, teens, adults & women

The Point CDC, 940 Garrison Ave. Contact Ms. Torres, 718-563-5072.
Mondays & Wednesdays, 6:30-8:30 p.m.
Fees: \$40 per month

Through November 2 Theater: Game Over

Pregones Theater, 571-575 Walton Avenue, 718-585-1202, info@pregones.org

■ A modern take on the book of Job.

November 3, 4, 7, 10, 11 Game on @ The Library

Hunts Point Branch, 877 Southern Blvd. at Tiffany St. Admission: Free

■ Play your favorite Wii and PS3 games like Guitar Hero, Dance Dance Revolution, Super Smash Bros Brawl and more! Challenge yourself and your friends! Create your own tournament in The Library! For ages 12-18.