

Bronx Teens Rock the Boat

By Jescine Jarvis

Building boats sounded boring to me—the sweat, the dirt and especially the work. I figured it was somewhere parents sent kids with nothing to do.

These were my thoughts when my fellow NYC writers, editors and I went to the Bronx one day in July to visit Rocking the Boat (RTB), a nonprofit organization that teaches teens how to build and use traditional wooden boats. Little did I know that by the time I left, I'd want to build one myself.

RTB has different programs that focus on boat building, maritime skills and environmental education. They're located at a storefront workshop in the South Bronx, between an African market and a tire shop.

RTB founder and director Adam Green and eight junior high school students launched the first boat in a middle school basement pool in 1995. Now the organization reaches 900 kids a year, and they just launched their 17th boat in June.

Starting From Scratch

The boatbuilding program runs during the summer and in two semester-long after-school programs during the school year. Students can receive school credit for their work, but you don't have to be in school to be in the program.

They mainly build Whitehall rowing boats, traditional 14-foot-long ferrying boats used in the 1700s to carry people to shore from big ships in New York Harbor.

Teens build the boats from scratch, starting with sawing down trees in forests upstate. Then they slice the trees into planks that can be used to build the boats. "It's a fun feeling starting from the bottom," said Edmanuel "Eddie" Roman, 20.

Eddie's love of carpentry drew him into RTB five and a half years ago, when he



Eddie Roman at work in the shop.

was a student at Alfred E. Smith HS. Now he's a senior shop apprentice at RTB and calls the program "the best thing ever to come to the Bronx."

Helping the Rivers

Participants use teamwork, carpentry and math skills to cut wood into the right shapes and sizes, and begin building.

Teens use the finished boats on the Bronx and East Rivers, through RTB's On-Water program, based in Clason Point Park in the Soundview section of the Bronx (and moving to Hunts Point in September). Here, teens learn maritime skills like swimming, rowing, boat safety and navigation.

They also use the boats to do environmental work. The program recently partnered with the New York City Department of Parks and Recreation to build an oyster reef—a hard surface where clusters of oysters can live—in the Bronx River, off of Soundview Park.

Oysters purify water by sucking in contaminated water, filtering it, and blowing it back out. One oyster can purify 50 gallons of water daily, according to Seth Goodwin, RTB's maritime skills educator. They're hoping the oyster reef will help clean up the polluted rivers.

I was impressed by all the work RTB was doing. But what amazed me most was



Jescine Jarvis

Floating on the East River

By Jescine Jarvis

We'd just visited the workshop of Rocking the Boat (RTB), a teen boatbuilding and water skills program in the Bronx. Now my fellow NYC writers, editors and I stood at the edge of the East River in Clason Point Park in the South Bronx, ready to try out some of their boats.

First, a few teens from RTB's On-Water program showed us how to put on a life vest correctly, like flight attendants at the beginning of a flight.

I got a small red and black vest. It was so cute, I wanted to wear it all day and set a new trend. But when I put it on, it felt as if everything inside me was



Jescine's maiden voyage.

getting sucked out. (It's supposed to fit tightly so it doesn't come off if you fall in the water.)

Second Thoughts

Before boarding the boat, I noticed how dirty the East River was. Pieces of

that RTB isn't all about work. It has helped teens to clean up not only the water, but their own acts. In many ways, the organization is like a family.

If it weren't for RTB, Eddie explained, "I would have been in the streets." Now he's dreaming bigger. "I want to build my own house," he said.

Sticking With It

RTB also helped Ali Wood, 20. Ali said he was a troublemaker when he was younger and was even incarcerated. RTB gave him a place to work and people to confide in. "If I would've come to RTB sooner, those things wouldn't have happened," he said.

He joined RTB eight years ago by chance, after following his brother into the shop one day when he was 12. Even though he was younger than any other participant, Green allowed him to stay.

Ali said something just told him that

RTB would be interesting. "I've been busy for eight years straight, so I guess my intuition was correct," he laughed.

Ali admitted that he did almost quit once. After six years, he figured he'd gotten everything out of RTB that he could. But he decided to stick with it and was rewarded when RTB created a new job skills apprenticeship program and offered him a place in it.

Now Ali uses his carpentry skills to maintain and repair RTB's fleet of wooden boats. "It teaches you not to give up on something," he said. ☒

How to Get Involved

To find out more about Rocking the Boat or sign up for a program, visit www.rockingtheboat.org or call (718) 466-5799.

Ladies With Power Tools

By Daniela Castillo

At first, Kadijah Abdur-Rahim and Irene Dominguez, both 20, looked like typical city girls in jeans, tank tops and jewelry. Then I watched them cut large pieces of wood about my height for a cargo boat they were building, using the kind of machinery that gets people big legal settlements in return for their limbs. That's when I realized that these were not your average girls.

Kadijah, who joined Rocking the Boat (RTB) in 2004, is a program assistant helping to run RTB's education programs and manage the week-long camping trips the program participants take during the summer. "If it wasn't for RTB, I would have never left the Bronx," she said.

When I asked Irene, also a program assistant, how it felt to be a female at RTB, she said, "It's cool. There's no



Irene and Kadijah strong-arm a boat onto a van along with Eddie Roman and Ali Wood (at left).

female this or that. You develop a tough skin."

I was impressed by their skill and commitment. But there was still a bit of girl beneath that tough skin. When someone came over and asked Irene to help carry out a boat, her response was, "Uh, uh, girl. I just got my nails done." Then she and Kadijah grabbed hold of the boat and started lifting. ☒

plastic had floated to the surface and there was garbage everywhere.

I was ashamed to be a Bronx resident when I saw how much people here hurt the river. I was also having second thoughts about getting into the boat, because I was afraid it might overturn and I'd end up in the water. There was no way I was getting my cute life vest wet.

We split up and got into three boats. My group's boat was called "Neptune." I was surprised at how professionally built and big it was—about 14 feet long. "They know how to build a boat," I thought. "I hope they know how to row one too."

A few NYC staffers and I sat in the front and back of the boat, while On-Water participant Zach Hairston, 16, sat

in the middle and rowed with two long wooden oars.

Better Than Yoga

Water began to splash on me as Zach rowed, and I began to panic because the water looked so filthy.

But as we rowed further out, the boat's slow movement in the calm water soothed me. I found myself just staring at the water. I felt so calm I thought about going there daily instead of doing yoga.

When we began heading back after about 15 minutes, Zach gave me an oar and showed me how to turn it in the water. When I got the hang of it, you should've seen my face. It was as if I'd won an Emmy Award. ☒