

Rocking the Bronx...with Boats

BY ADAM GREEN, FOUNDER OF ROCKING THE BOAT



PHOTOS BY CHRIS EDEN AND ROCKING THE BOAT

Last December, while on a project in New York, I had an opportunity to spend some time with Adam Green and to tour Rocking the Boat. It had been a decade since last visiting with Adam; that's when our first story appeared in *Rudder*. Seeing the exciting changes and progress that have taken place there over the past ten years was truly inspirational. Adam agreed to share with our ACBS members just what they have been up to and how RTB has profoundly changed the lives of so many great kids in the Bronx. Enjoy. *Chris Eden, Editor*

Back in 2002, *Rudder* magazine first printed an article on Rocking the Boat, an innovative program that brought kids and boats together in the heart of New York City. I had founded that program five years earlier to give high school kids an opportunity to learn about life and their own possibilities through traditional wooden boatbuilding. We had just incorporated as an independent non-profit organization the year before and were building our sixth boat in a small storefront, had an annual budget of \$200,000, and employed two full-time staff—an office manager and me—serving as both the Executive Director and boatbuilding teacher.

Ten years later, kids are still building boats at Rocking the Boat and the essence of that program I was leading in 2002 is still the same, but now a vibrant multi-faceted organization has grown around it. Today, Rocking the Boat operates a 14,000 square-foot facility in the Hunts Point section of the South Bronx with a \$1.5 million annual budget, and has thirteen full-time staff that includes two boat builders, two sailors, three licensed social workers, and two environmental educators. Those thirteen, along with a couple of us who raise the money, maintain the website, and keep the books, plus another fourteen part-time staff, all of whom are former participants in the program, serve over 3,000 people young people and community members annually.

And we don't just build boats. Our philosophy is that the best learning happens when it's being applied practically, so the boats our students build are in turn used to fulfill a range of environmental restoration projects on the Bronx River. Young people are involved in building each boat, while learning everything needed to use them, including rowing, swimming, boat handling, and sailing. They then use these skills to bring our river back to life.



The biggest tangible change from 2002 is our new building; that, and the dramatic growth in the number of people who make their way through the doors of our shop each year, plus the sextupling of rowing, sailing, and powerboats crowding our six 40-foot shipping containers. In 2010, after over a decade of running programs in multiple, and never adequate, storefronts, empty lots, and parks, all of our operations consolidated into a 6,000 square-foot former warehouse with an 8,000 square foot yard that has direct access to the Bronx River. Half of the building is dedicated to the boatbuilding shop—with enough space for our now two tiers of boatbuilding programs to run simultaneously. The rest is filled with a science lab, full kitchen, large lobby and lounge, library mezzanine, and administrative offices for all of our staff. Beyond the practical





Katherine de la Torre

Boats have become my life and I really hope to keep working on them for the rest of my life. But aside from picking up boatbuilding skills, I have made great friends at Rocking the Boat and learned that my future is in my hands.

Katherine de la Torre heralded in a great stage at Rocking the Boat in which girls outnumbered boys in the Boatbuilding shop, and both the quality of carpentry and the work environment were superb. In the spring and summer of 2007, she was an important member of the teams that built a Rangeley Lakes fishing boat and a Maine lumberman's bateau, before going on to become a star Boatbuilding Job Skills Apprentice. A freshman at Lehman College, one of the Bronx schools that collaborates with Rocking the Boat on a number of projects, Katherine is studying math (a subject utilized daily in boatbuilding) en route to her goal of becoming a lawyer. Rocking the Boat helped Katherine apply to a scholarship program aimed at increasing the quality and quantity of minority students successfully completing degrees in science, technology, engineering, and mathematics.

Among the most impressive of Katherine's many good qualities are her optimism and resilience. She believes and can help her peers recognize that anything is possible with the right attitude. And she should know: alone on the way to the shop one afternoon when dusk was settling, Katherine was nearly assaulted by a man who tried to pull her into his car. She was released without physical harm, but was severely shaken by the incident. Even so, she didn't let this stop her from sticking with the program. In fact, she became vocal at several community forums on safety, calling for better street lighting and increased police patrols in and around Hunts Point.



As part of a strenuous fund-raising event, ten teams circumnavigated Manhattan Island in 26½-foot hand-built wooden rowing boats with RTB students serving as coxswains. The day-long, 28 1/2 mile event netted over \$56,000.



Tiffany Barker

I have a voice that is loud enough to be heard along with everyone else at Rocking the Boat, because one can make a difference, and together we all make change.

Guyanese native Tiffany Barker lived with her mother in Bedford-Stuyvesant, Brooklyn, and traveled two hours each way every day to the Bronx to attend high school. Starting Rocking the Boat's On-Water Program in spring 2006, Tiffany threw herself into the work, taking naturally to the subject matter and discovering a talent for teaching. With a tremendous will to make things happen, Tiffany advanced after two years in the after-school program to become a Job Skills Apprentice in spring 2008. She held leadership roles during her experience with the program, serving as project manager for boating equipment and the point-person for disseminating water monitoring data. She told all who would listen that she was going to become "a doctor, a marine biologist, and one day, the President of Guyana." On her way to those goals, Tiffany is now studying marine environmental science in the Regiment of Cadets Program at the State University of New York Maritime College. Through this rigorous program, she will not only graduate with a B.S., but also a U.S. Coast Guard Captain's license and the valuable experience of traveling to as many as nine international ports. Given what Tiffany has achieved so far, the presidency of her country doesn't seem so far-fetched.



value of one space that allows us to run all of our programs together, the building makes a strong statement to the Bronx community we serve that Rocking the Boat is here to stay.

Rocking the Boat has made that statement to the larger wooden boat community as well. Rocking the Boat has made its mark on a national scale. In 2008 it was the subject of a feature story in *WoodenBoat Magazine*, is a regular exhibitor at the WoodenBoat Show since 2004, and has become arguably the most prominent boatbuilding education program in the country. My advice is regularly sought from other youth development groups, maritime museums, and schools, both existing and brand new, on how to develop similar programs. People from California, Washington, Minnesota, Alabama, Pennsylvania, and Massachusetts have all come to learn from Rocking the Boat's model. What they see is an organization focused on making deep and significant impact on some of the poorest kids in the country, entirely through boats and water. In the words of Emily Martinez, a student in our On-Water Program:

I am so thankful to have Rocking the Boat in my life. It has made me a better person. It has given me people I can trust and talk to. I love when I'm out in the middle of the East River on a boat because I get to think about everything that's happening in my life. If I'm having issues at home or in school, I get to think about what I can do to help myself. 'Port. Starboard. Hold water. Forward row.' These rowing commands tell me when and where to row. They give me direction. Not only when I'm rowing, but in my life as well.

By 2002, as our students finished their sixth boat, we realized we had some thinking to do. As beautiful and fun to use as our boats were, all we did with them was splash around in the river for fun. If using the boats we built was going to fulfill a meaningful and lasting role at Rocking the Boat, then our boats needed a useful purpose. In looking at what could be done with a fleet of small wooden boats on the Bronx River, we chose to take on the job of river restoration—something that could only be done with our unique access to the water. Since then, Rocking the Boat students have been working hand-in-hand with professional scientists to study and restore the Bronx River. This year's line-up of nine separate projects is our most ambitious by far. The work is tightly packed into a schedule that sees students rowing their Whitehalls out to test river water weekly for a host of indicators like dissolved oxygen and turbidity; sailing our Cape Cod Oyster Skiff to our oyster reef to measure the oysters' growth; and revving up the 15-horse outboard on our Flat Iron Skiff to zip out to our mussel and seaweed raft and measure the amount of nitrates the mollusks and plants are able to filter. The opportunity to put these nineteenth-century wooden boat designs to use to solve twenty-first-century problems is thrilling for all involved.

That said, Rocking the Boat participants still get to have fun on the boats too. Of the 3,000 people we serve, about 1,250 participate in our free Saturday Community Rowing Program. Anyone who wishes to is welcomed out on our boats and given the opportunity to explore the Bronx River. For many young people, this is their

A 265-year-old white oak that had blown down in the New York Botanical Garden was salvaged and cut into 20-foot lengths; enough lumber to serve RTB's boating needs for two years.

Adam Green is RTB's founder and Executive Director. The roots of his interest in local maritime history and environmental education started back in college where he also led a volunteer project to build an 8 ft. pram using plans from a magazine.





Mussels and seaweed are being grown on ropes hanging from a raft stationed just outside the outfall of the Hunts Point Wastewater Treatment Plant. RTB is studying how these organisms remove nutrients from the mouth of the Bronx River.



first time on a boat. For their parents and grandparents, this is an experience that brings them back to their childhoods in the Caribbean, West Africa, and South America. Barbara Alicea, who grew up and still works in the neighborhood, took her father down to our Bronx River park last summer. He was expecting to see the dirty, forbidding river he remembered from years past. "When we walked down to the river," Barbara recently told me, "at first he was hesitant to get on board. But then he looked at the water and saw how beautiful it was—not at all like what he remembered. We got out on one of Rocking the Boat's boats, with one of the students rowing, and he saw a different perspective on the Bronx. Completely. He saw new parks and beautiful birds flying above and sitting on poles and he was amazed. And then he said, 'where was this program when you were in high school?'" And that's a huge part of Rocking the Boat. We give people an opportunity to have amazing experiences within their own community—and within themselves—that they may have never known existed.

We had only built one design of boat back in 2002—the Whitehall—and we built all six of them with wood we bought from the local lumber yard. As of 2012, we have built nineteen different kinds of boats, with two more designs under construction. These include dories, peapods, rowing, sailing, and power skiffs, cat boats, drag boats, kayaks, prams, and even an ice boat. Ten of them are sailboats, allowing us to develop a highly active sailing curriculum, and four of them live out on moorings at the mouth of the Bronx River, just like they do in any coastal harbor. The wood we build them from comes from a variety of sources, including our own Bronx River Forest. Two years ago, we salvaged a 265-year-old white oak that had blown down in a storm in the New York Botanical Garden and cut a 20-foot length of it into enough lumber to serve our boating needs for two years. Our largest project ever, a 29-foot whaleboat, is currently under construction. The Mystic Seaport Museum is doing a major restoration of the *Charles W. Morgan*, the last great wooden whaling ship in the United States. Rocking the Boat was commissioned to build one of its seven whaleboats and sixteen students are six months into the process. They will work over the next year and a-half to finish this monster, and then sail it the length of the Long Island Sound from the Bronx to Mystic for its maiden voyage.

Kids still show up at 4 p.m. every afternoon to build boats at Rocking the Boat, just like they did in 2002. But Rocking the Boat is no longer my own little experiment. We are a leading institution with a staff, a board, and a thousand-strong body of alumni, all committed to seeing the organization sustain and grow long into the future.

Make sure to visit RTB's website: www.rockingtheboat.org. You'll be amazed at the number of interesting projects going on.



Above: Eight apprentices worked with an ecological artist, environmental engineers, and contractors to install a 10,000 square foot wetland and grassland on the banks of the Bronx River. Students planted more than 8,000 plants that will process all the runoff from a 30,000 square-foot parking lot plus creating a beautiful, new public access green space.

Below left: John Brady, who ran the Independence Seaport Museum's boat shop, Workshop on the Water, for 25 years and is currently the organization's CEO, has a ten-year connection with Rocking the Boat. Here he pilots one of RTB's latest projects down the rubber river toward the water.





Elizabeth Severino

Before I entered Rocking the Boat I felt like another Hispanic girl who lived in the projects. I hated high school. The ominous feeling of it made me become depressed. I was ready to just drop out when I discovered Rocking the Boat.

I was fifteen-years old and had always dreamed of working with wildlife but thought the only way I could do that would be to leave New York City. Rocking the Boat gave me that opportunity right in my own neighborhood. I remember the day that I realized how important this program was to me.

I was rowing in one of the student-built Whitehalls on the Bronx River. I looked to my left and saw a Black Crowned Night Heron perched on a piece of metal sticking off a recycling barge. I was amazed by how such a beautiful, colorful creature could exist in the middle of New York City. I realized then that everything I was looking for was right in front of my eyes. I just needed to aim for it, or in this case, row to it.

Thanks to Rocking the Boat's encouragement, I decided to stay in high school and transferred to another school that allowed me to hold an internship twice a week. My internship was with Sustainable South Bronx and I was fortunate to be able to work with its founder and Executive Director, Majora Carter.

I remember one day Majora walked up to me and asked me for my opinion about the value of youth programs. I stood there puzzled, wondering why

someone like Majora Carter would ask for my opinion. Did I really matter that much? So I gave her my opinion and she seemed amazed by my answer —so much so that she asked me to give a speech about it in her Green Jobs not Jails forum!

After graduating high school in 2008, I returned to Rocking the Boat as a Program Assistant. Now I had the opportunity to share the beauty that I found on the Bronx River with hundreds of other people.

In October, 2010, I was invited to go to Shanghai to represent Rocking the Boat at an international youth environmental conference. I spoke to an audience of high school and college students from around the world about our work to restore the Bronx River oyster population.

Because of Rocking the Boat and people like Majora Carter I was able to realize that I could be one of the many leaders in this world.

I am now a sophomore at Borough of Manhattan Community College and am holding a full-time National Parks Service/Student Conservation Association internship, running a Harlem River youth education program.

Now I am a proud Hispanic girl from the Bronx changing the world, and I am so glad my life went the direction it did or else I would have never discovered nature in New York City, I would never have had the pleasure of meeting Majora Carter, and I would never have benefitted from being part of Rocking the Boat.

