

DOCKIN' T

Standing on the corner of 174th Street and Townsend Avenue in the Bronx, looking over the Cross Bronx Expressway and its noisy racing streams of auto and truck traffic, it's hard to think about boats. It's hard to imagine fleets of 19th-century wooden boats plying the rivers, ponds, and lakes of New York City. It's hard to imagine yourself in one of those boats, feeling the sun warming your cheeks

WE DDD ONLY

Adam Green pairs teaching with boat-building to set teens on a new course

by Jessica Winum

and hearing the water lapping the sides of the boat.

But despite the fact that there isn't a stream or pond in sight from this corner of the Bronx, boating is exactly what Adam Green '95 wants sixteen neighborhood teenagers to imagine as they begin to build a replica of a 19th-century Whitehall rowboat—once upon a time New York City's everyday workboat—in a storefront on that corner.

Green is founder and coordinator of Rocking the Boat, an after-school and summer program that offers inner-city high-school students an alternative approach to education and development. Through the traditional craft of boat-building, students learn practical, academic, and social skills that Green hopes will help them take control of their lives and overcome the seemingly insurmountable obstacles that face them.

The students who take part in Rocking the Boat live in some of New York City's poorest neighborhoods: Average income in the area is \$13,604. Education is a challenge: The three high schools that serve the area—Taft, Walton, and Roosevelt—graduated only 27–37 percent of their students on time in 1996. In all of Community School District 9, only 43 percent of students are at or above grade level in math, and only 31 percent read at or above grade level.

Rocking the Boat students' introduction to the tools of boat-building includes such basics as How to Use a Ruler. Green captivates the teens as they navigate the art of fractions and the math of carpentry. He guides them beyond their initial bewilderment at the lines and angles of a diagram that cover a poster on the shop's wall—"That is supposed to be a boat?" they ask—to the final creation of a water worthy vessel and greater academic confidence—"We're walking calculators," boasts 16-year-old Carolina. Other lessons come from experience.

On a Wednesday afternoon in March, teens were at work fastening boards together for the as yet unnamed new boat. Carolina mixed up a batch of epoxy adhesive and spread it thickly on the end of a large, quarter-inch plywood board. Christopher, 15, covered another board's end with the same thick paste. Then, with help from several other teens in the boat-building class, they flipped one board onto the



Green helps students master the art, math, and craft of carpentry.

other, sandwiching the glue. Christopher grabbed a drill and proceeded to fasten the two boards together. But the rubber glove he wore wound itself securely around the screw he held, and the operation ground to a halt amidst laughter. Lesson: Rubber gloves are not appropriate gear for every job.

Green began Rocking the Boat in 1996 as a volunteer project at the East Harlem Maritime School, where he helped a group of junior high school students construct an eight-foot dinghy from salvaged wood. They used it in the school's basement pool for a rowing program. In 1997, he moved the program to the Center for Pre-College Initiatives at Hostos Community College in the South Bronx, where he helped at-risk students build the first 14-foot Whitehall replica. In 1998 boat building activities moved again, to a basement at New Settlement Apartments in the Bronx, a nonprofit housing development and community organization that is home to almost 900 fami-

lies in 14 renovated buildings. This spring, it will move two blocks to a more visible storefront at the corner of 174 and Townsend. Funding comes from a variety of city, regional, state, and national organizations.

Rocking the Boat gives Green a sense of fulfillment that he has been seeking since he graduated from Vassar with a degree in American culture. Green grew up on Central Park West, the son of a social worker and an editor for the Metropolitan Transportation Authority. His experience with the water and boating was limited to frequent trips to visit the Hudson River sloop *Clearwater*, launched by folksinger Pete Seeger 30 years ago and used as a floating environmental education and awareness classroom on the Hudson River. Those visits had a lasting impact.

Green took a semester off from Vassar to work as an intern on the *Clearwater*, and Seeger now serves as an informal adviser to Rocking the Boat. "There isn't much I can tell him that he doesn't already know,"



Pete Seeger and the Hudson River Sloop *Clearwater* are Green's muses.

says Seeger, "except maybe some history since I've been on the planet longer."

During his *Clearwater* internship, Green served as an educator for hundreds of Hudson Valley schoolchildren who boarded the sloop to learn about the estuary's ecosystem. A passion was born. He found he loved both the traditions of sailing and imparting knowledge to receptive young minds. In trying to meld these into something that could put food on his table, he came up with *Rocking the Boat*.

"I was never trying to be an entrepreneur," he says in response to a description of him as a social entrepreneur, "or to make a lot of money, or save the world, or shoot for any far-reaching goal for that matter. I was just trying to do something that helped me feel really good and fulfilled. After quite a lot of stumbling, I tripped across teaching, and it felt great. From there I just kept on tripping along, trying to keep up."

The fact that Green is simply doing and sharing something that he enjoys may account in part for his apparently easy acceptance into the community. For their part, the students—all students of color—are matter-of-fact about his presence. Says Carolina: "You get through life meeting people like that, and you just have to get used to it." Without *Rocking the Boat*, she adds, "I would just be at my house or chillin' in the streets playing basketball."

Shared tragedy brought Green and the community closer too. In March 1999, Green's girlfriend Amy Watkins, a social-work intern at New Settlement and student at Hunter College, was brutally murdered in Brooklyn in an apparently random and still unsolved attack.

The crew elected to name the boat they were working on that spring the *Amy Watkins* to honor the young woman who had given so much of herself to their community. It was the first boat built at New Settlement.

Since that time Green, his shop apprentice Kevin (an 18-year-old *Rocking the Boat* alum), and Green's shop assistant Adelaida have

overseen construction of the *NSA Eclipse*, and they are hard at work on a third *Whitehall*, the wood for which came from a giant white oak downed in a storm on Seeger's Dutchess County property. When the boat is finished and named, the kids and Green will

invite the rest of the community to a festival at a waterfront park to officially launch the craft. This culminating celebration is crucial to the success of the program, says Green, who adds that it's the best way for everyone to "be a part of what the kids are doing."

Green's longer term goal is to use the boats for environmental education programs. Groups already take field trips every other Saturday during boat-building terms; they've explored the New York Botanical Garden, fished for striped bass in New York Harbor, sailed on the *Clearwater*, protested at a proposed landfill site, traveled to Mystic Seaport, and visited a sawmill.

"The first step in shaping an activist is turning people on, letting them know the worth of something by showing them how to enjoy it and how to have fun," says Green. "I want the kids to know that the water wasn't always so murky and smelly, and experiencing it gives them a context for wanting change."

For now, Green will continue working to expand *Rocking the Boat*, in part by developing stronger relationships with many local schools. Several teachers worked with him to select this session's students, and he would like teachers to incorporate the many academic aspects of *Rocking the Boat*—math, history, and earth science—into their curricula.

When *Rocking the Boat* moves out of its basement workshop into the much larger storefront on 174th Street, it will increase its visibility in its community. But wherever the program is—in the basement, on the river, or looking out over the Cross Bronx Expressway—Green hopes that the kids are taking to heart the most important lesson to be learned through *Rocking the Boat*. "If you can build a boat in a basement in the Bronx," he says, "you can do anything." ●



Adam Green, center with beard, and his March crew of boat-builders.

RADIO WAVES

When radio journalist and Manhattan native Annie Cheney '96 read that Adam Green '95 was teaching inner-city teenagers how to build boats, she knew it would make a great story.

Cheney enlisted the help of All Wood, then 13, to carry around a tape recorder and document the thoughts, feelings, and experiences of *Rocking the Boat*'s summer class of 1999 as they struggled to build—entirely by hand—a replica of a 19th-century *Whitehall* wooden boat. What started out being an interesting story turned into an intense experience for Cheney—who discovered an entirely new world in her very own city—and for Wood, who is preparing for an internship at a local New York radio station, on his way to a career in broadcasting. It also marked the start of a continuing friendship between Cheney and her junior correspondent.

The final six-minute-long piece, narrated entirely by Wood and funded by a \$5,000 Media Alliance fellowship for emerging artists in radio, aired as part of the evening news on WBAI radio in New York City last January. The best thing about the project, concludes Green, is that it "forced the kids to think about what they were doing and made their experience more cohesive."