

Eliza Strickland

The Buoyant Brigade

Young boat builders help restore a neglected urban river

ON A FRIDAY EVENING on the banks of the Bronx River, the bulldozers push together one last heap of clanking steel at Sal's scrap metal yard, and the plastics recycling facility shuts down for the night. This South Bronx neighborhood, located in the poorest congressional district in the country, is where much of New York City's dirty work gets done.

But as the industrial clamor dies down, new sounds take its place: the splash of oars in the water, the creak of wood, and excited voices. Rowboats spread out along the river, carrying groups of teenagers and families who have come for the weekly informal rowing party.

These Friday rows, strictly for pleasure, cap a busy week for the thirty-six high school students and eleven apprentices working in the nonprofit Rocking the Boat program. Every weekday afternoon from February to December, a contingent of students takes a turn rowing out onto the Bronx River, where they work with local environmental organizations on habitat monitoring and restoration projects. As the river's caretakers, they test pollutant levels in the water, conduct fish surveys, and plant marsh grass to stabilize the riverbanks. Since 1998, the program has served more than four hundred students.

Any number of programs nationwide

do similar work: expose children to their local rivers, engage them in restoration work, and help them become stewards of the habitat. But Rocking the Boat does it all with a homemade twist. Each semester, sixteen of the group's students participate in a boat-building program to construct a vessel that will bear them out onto the water. During Rocking the Boat's seven years of operation, the teens have built fourteen wooden Whitehall rowboats, the kind that ferried cargo in New York's harbor in the mid-1800s. The students take responsibility for the entire process. According to river restoration experts, it's the only such program in the nation.

"It's an amazing cycle," says Adam Green, thirty-two, the organization's founder and executive director. "We actually go into the forest, saw down our own lumber from it, mill it, build our boats from it, use it in the Bronx River, and plant new grasses."

On a typical afternoon in the storefront workshop, a dozen teenagers cluster around the wooden skeleton of a boat, expertly wielding power drills and hammers. The apprentices guide the newest participants, showing them how to steam wooden planks and bend them to the frame. Woody, the sawdust-colored shop cat, scoots under a workbench.

Meliza Peña-Martinez, a vivacious twenty-year-old with a ready smile, has been a constant presence around the shop since she first walked in at the age of sixteen. She soon became Rocking the Boat's first female apprentice and then took charge of the on-water after-school program as a senior apprentice. Peña-Martinez keeps tabs on the mussels, bluefish, and catfish that are a sign of the Bronx River's recovering health, and scouts for invasive species like Japanese rock crabs. "I'm a good person to get lost at sea with," she jokes. "I know how to build a boat, how to navigate, how to fish." She attributes her skills, and her devotion to the river, to the integrated nature of Rocking the Boat.

"It's the whole thing," she says. "You found the tree, you cut the tree, you planed it. You're exploring the tools, the wood, everything. Then it's like, 'Let's explore the water.' It's like an adventure, a scientific expedition. You become more interested in what's around you."

That's unusual for many South Bronx teenagers, whose environment consists of industrial plants, gray streets, and small apartments, and who tend to view the Bronx River, if at all, only at a distance, from the highway that bears its name. "This neighborhood has been cut off from the water for so long," says Karen Carter, whose son, Elias, has found a second home at Rocking the Boat's cozy boat-building workshop. "It's good for the kids to see something natural and beautiful in their neighborhood. It's no Garden of Eden yet, but this is where it starts."

The Bronx River, stewarded by a consor-



Rocking the Boat students build the vessel they will row to monitor and care for the Bronx River.

tium of environmental and community groups, is experiencing a revival. Community agitation has led to an ambitious plan for a riverside greenway for park-starved residents. And the water has become much cleaner over the past decade, in part thanks to Rocking the Boat.

“[The students] are gathering data at eight monitoring sites that we’re using to inform our ‘State of the River’ document,” says Anne-Marie Runfola, education coordinator for the Bronx River Alliance, an umbrella organization for restoration efforts. “And we’re hoping they’ll become our future stewards.”

Rocking the Boat’s founder, the bushy-bearded Green, who looks every inch the carpenter in a red flannel shirt and paint-spattered pants, built his first boat while volunteering at an East Harlem junior high school. He worked with a class for eight months, learning the boat-building process alongside the students. “We launched our dinghy in the basement pool of the school,” he says, “and it floated!”

Green noticed that the students took pride in mastering the unusual skills of boat building, which kept the teens focused. In 1998, he founded Rocking the Boat, housing it at an apartment complex.

Recruitment and retention were Green’s

biggest problems as he tried to compete with music videos, teenage flirtations, and family upheavals that can move a teenager across town with no warning. “Just because a kid has shown up twice this week doesn’t mean you can count on him tomorrow,” he says. To provide incentive, Green arranged for the students to receive high school credit for their work. And to compete with after-school jobs at McDonald’s, Green created eleven paid apprentice positions.

In 2000, Green moved the workshop to a local storefront to give the operation more visibility and room to expand. In 2001, the program incorporated as a non-profit. By 2002, the boat-building program had produced a small fleet, and Green added the river-monitoring program. Now many students do boat building one semester and monitoring the next.

With more boats in hand, Rocking the Boat participants also began to organize programs for fellow high school students, including one-day lessons on riparian ecology, semester-long projects, and the open community rows on Fridays. The events can bring as many as two hundred young people onto the water each week.

Green says such exposure can transform children. “If you can look into your own community and find beautiful things

in it,” he says, “you can also look into yourself or your own family and see something beautiful. We’re cleaning up the river to revitalize the people who live along it. But those are the people who are going to keep that river clean and usable.”

Peña-Martinez has become one of those people, after some frustration. As a child on her daily walk to elementary school, she would stop on a bridge and, as the traffic whizzed by, peer over the railing at the Bronx River below. She tried to convince her teacher to organize a field trip to the river, but her teacher responded, “No, honey, that river’s dirty!” Peña-Martinez recalls. She didn’t step foot on the riverbank until the day she learned to row with Rocking the Boat.

Now, firmly committed to her position with the program, she takes pleasure in convincing squealing girls and blustering boys to take their turns at the oars. On Friday evenings, Peña-Martinez points out the white egrets and night herons that skim over the water. She beams as a twelve-year-old girl promises to come back next week with her cousins. If Peña-Martinez’s own introduction is any indication, the new recruit will enjoy herself and befriend the Bronx River.

“You start with something from scratch and you see that it works. That’s indescribable,” she says. “You’re connected to the boat. You’re connected to the water. My first time I was like, ‘I built this boat. I could do anything.’” 🐾

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