


# Building the Kids Who Build the Boats

By Jaye Pockriss



With a name like Rocking the Boat and an address like 812 Edgewater Road, you'd be right to imagine a spunky organization that spends a lot of time on the water.

Then you'd be accurate picturing a fleet of brightly painted 14- and 17-foot Whitehall rowing boats with names like *Audacity*, *Phoenix*, and *Nereid*. What you might not expect is that all of these boats were hand-built by local high school students in the Hunts Point section of the South Bronx, one of the poorest, most underserved neighborhoods in the nation.


small boat. Now, they board sailboats that they and their peers have built and cruise along the Long Island Sound. They take in the sights and test their sailing mettle before camping on a small island preserve off the shore of Greenwich, Connecticut.

Rocking the Boat's Executive Director, Adam Green, founded the nonprofit organization 15 years ago as "a youth development organization." He explains, "That means we're not just here to stop kids from getting in trouble. We want them to be real successes, and to empower them by giving them real maritime, environmental, and boatbuilding skills."

Program participants—many of whom had a hard time even reading a ruler when they first signed up—have used sophisticated math and science to build 41 boats to date. Along with the Whitehalls, they have put together traditional

designs including as a Cape Cod Oyster skiff, a colonial river ferry, a pair of 19-foot Connecticut River Drag Boats, and a Melonseed skiff.

The group just completed its most ambitious project to date, a 29-foot Beetle whaleboat, one of 10 whaleboats commissioned by Mystic Seaport Museum from nine organizations across seven states. The Rocking the Boat vessel is the only one entirely built by students, who have been inspired by Green's simple formula that kids don't just build boats—boats build kids.



Many of the students involved with Rocking the Boat had never ventured out of their neighborhoods before, and none of them had ever been on a





A wealthy wooden boat lover underwrote the cost of the mammoth whaleboat project, but individuals also donate to Rocking the Boat at all levels, contributing about a third of the organization's annual \$1.7 million budget (the rest derives from foundations, corporate grants, earned income, and some government support). There's also a fundraising event coming up in September—a row around the entire island of Manhattan. Using contacts and other social media, rowers are seeking sponsorship of their 29.5-mile trip. Please check the website, [www.rockingtheboat.org](http://www.rockingtheboat.org), for more information about this trip, as well as opportunities to register your company for a corporate teambuilding program, your students for a Bronx River On-Water Classroom program, or yourself for an ecology tour.

You don't have to open your wallet to interact with the group, however. Rocking the Boat runs a free summer-long Community Rowing program on Saturday afternoons out of Hunts Point Riverside Park. A crew of Program Assistants—program alumni working

for Rocking the Boat part-time while they attend college—will be on hand to help those interested in going for a row.

Students interested in joining the Rocking the Boat after-school program don't need any prior woodworking or on-water experience; they just need the curiosity to try something new and the commitment to see it through. The group seeks 9<sup>th</sup> and 10<sup>th</sup> graders to work with throughout high school with the goal of getting them through college. Rocking the Boat students' high school graduation rate this year was 100%, while statistics show that two out of three of their peers dropped out. Three staff social workers, including one dedicated to supporting program alumni, are a big part of the success of students and alumni.

Action takes place in Rocking the Boat's newly renovated 6,000-square-foot building, containing a professional-grade shop, environmental lab, and library. The boat shop is always humming with machinery and industrious students performing tasks such as steam bending planks, fastening copper rivets, and caulking seams with cotton. Using as much as 4,000 board feet of

cedar and white oak, the group builds at least two boats each year and repairs many more (the Rocking the Boat fleet is used by over 3,000 students and community members annually).

Then the action moves outdoors to the building's back yard, the Bronx River. That waterway was once infamous for its pollution; now it supports a panoply of plants and wildlife. Groups of four students row the handmade boats to various sites on the River—which is tidal for its first three miles before it empties directly into the Long Island Sound—to take water samples for testing, monitor oyster beds, and check on the seaweed lines they are growing. Plus, they sail, taking short outings on the Bronx and East Rivers and extended excursions up the Hudson and out on the Long Island Sound.

Lloyd M. was 15 when he moved from South Africa to the South Bronx. His introduction to Rocking the Boat was taking part in the summer sailing trip to Greenwich. "To know that I'm sailing on a thing that I made is the greatest experience ever," he says with a smile. We agree! ⚓

*Jaye Pockriss is the Development Director of Rocking the Boat.*

