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PHOTOS

N.J. students in environment-education program ride self-built canoes on Passaic River

by **Ralph R. Ortega**/The Star-Ledger
Monday May 18, 2009, 7:00 PM



Jennifer Brown/The Star-Ledger

Kids from William Brown Academy carry their boat "Wild Cats" to the Passaic River.

NEWARK -- About three dozen students from four schools in the city took wooden canoes they crafted from blank pieces of wood, and caste them on the murky waters of the Passaic River this weekend as the culmination of a program that taught them math, history, environmental science and carpentry skills.

Their excitement quickly turned into nervousness as they worried whether their hand-crafted vessels would hold their weight.

"I've never been in a boat. If we fall, I can't swim," said a clearly worried Jazmine Serrano, a 13-year-old eighth-grader from William H. Brown Academy.

But she said she also couldn't pass up the chance to try a boat she helped make from scratch.

"I built it, and I want to ride on it," she said.

In addition to Brown Academy, which launched "The Wild Cat;" students from LINK Community School built "Cloud Nine;" The Discovery Charter School built "Chocolate Express;" and Ninth Grade Academy launched "Bear."

For about two hours Saturday, they paddled their canoes, each painted in the school's colors, past industrial sites, hundreds of shipping containers, the Jackson Street bridge, and part of downtown Newark, including Bears & Eagles Riverfront Stadium.

A nonprofit, environmental education group, Project USE -- which stands for Urban Suburban Environments -- contracted with Newark schools for the past three years to provide the materials and instruction for the program that has taught about 100 sixth- through ninth-graders to build boats.

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Jennifer Brown/The Star-Ledger

Students from four Newark schools learned about Newark's nautical history, studied science behind boats, and built their own wooden canoes which they launch on the Passaic River from Riverbank Park in Newark.

Funding is provided through the Geraldine R. Dodge Foundation and the Victoria Foundation. In addition, this year several of the schools raised money to pay for some or all of their program, enabling Project USE to offer the course at a larger number of schools, said Michael Bagley, executive director of Project USE.

By turning a piece of wood into a functional boat, children combine many of the skills they've learned in school, said Marie Pasquariello, an instructor from Project USE, who oversaw the program.

"A lot of math and science is involved. They start out with a blank piece of wood and they have to plot points, connect the dots, figure out how two-dimensional things fit together to make a three-dimensional object," Pasquariello said.

Along with the carpentry, they also learned about the properties of water -- displacement, surface tension and buoyancy -- and about the river's wildlife and the habitat it provides.

A big part of the lesson is on the nautical history of the Passaic River -- how Robert Treat and the Puritans came down the river from Connecticut to Newark; how the Submarine Boat Corp., which employed tens of thousands of workers to outfit the U.S. Navy with war boats and submarines, once called the river home, and how industry polluted both the river and its fish.

City officials and environmental groups pushing for the clean-up of the dioxin-filled river, said they're encouraged to see the children using the river. Their boat-building project helps promote the cause of returning the river to health, they said.



Jennifer Brown/The Star-Ledger

The Discovery Charter School built "Chocolate Express." Front to back, fifth graders Deja Dalce, Jasmine Nazire, and 7th-grader Simone Williams take it for its maiden journey.

"Having kids use the river will help build public support so the river gets cleaned up at a higher level, and will also help create the demand for public access," said Jeff Tittel, director of the New Jersey Sierra Club.

East Ward Councilman Augusto Amadour, who represents the Ironbound along the waterfront, said he too was glad to see school children boating on the river. He said he expects more boaters will do the same once the city builds a new floating dock near where the students launched their boat. The dock will be part of a new waterfront park that officials expect to break ground next year.

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"I'm absolutely thrilled that we're finally beginning to see some signs that the river will eventually be cleaned up, and available for canoeing, sailing and other activities," he said.

Toni L. Griffin, the director of community development who oversees planning on the waterfront, praised the young boaters for their work.

"They prove that the Passaic River is something to be celebrated and explored," she said.

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Posted by **doctorphil1** on [05/18/09 at 9:00PM](#)

Interestingly, the William H. Brown Academy (formerly called Bergen Street School) will be closed by the Newark Public Schools' superintendent next month because it is "under performing."

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Posted by **ReelFangz** on [05/18/09 at 10:38PM](#)

I don't care what the experts say...there are still more dead bodies in that damn river than there are fish. I hope those kids aren't the squeamish types.

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Posted by **mckay21** on [05/19/09 at 6:28AM](#)

Great program.....good job!

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