

City Children Find Their Sea Legs By Learning How to Sail the Hudson

By JAVIER C. HERNANDEZ

With the sails flapping briskly above them, the crew of five young sailors looked out over the Hudson River with the nonchalance of seasoned mariners.

Emanuel Portes, 10, was in charge. "Is everybody ready to tack?" he asked during the roughly two-hour voyage off Chelsea. The response was affirmative. He counted down — 5, 4, 3, 2, 1 — then jerked the tiller sideways to change the boat's direction.

The 24-foot vessel spun until it completed an unexpected 360-degree turn. He strengthened his grip on the tiller and blushed, saying, "Oops."

Emanuel and his crew had hit the water for the first time a few days earlier as skeptics. Sailing required too much know-how, they thought, and besides, it seemed to be a sport meant for rich people on vacation rather than children from Washington Heights on their summer break. But through a program run by a nonprofit group called Hudson River Community Sailing, the youngsters got a crash course in boating last week, and picked up a few lessons about teamwork on the side.

Bill Bahen, founder and director of the group, started the summer sailing program this year in the hope of increasing accessibility to a sport central to his own life. The son of avid sailors, Mr. Bahen grew up on the waters off the Maryland coast, a place where he said "those who had access to sailing were a different demographic."

He modeled his group after successful community sailing programs in other cities.

"We want them to know they can do something that is outside of their comfort zone and gain a little more confidence in themselves," Mr. Bahen said of the young sailors. "It's a way to enlighten them."

Mr. Bahen secured space at Pier 66 from the Hudson River Park Trust and began with a fleet of three donated sailboats. The group held a fund-raiser last month and is relying on individual donations for most of its financing.

Mr. Bahen worked with community organizations to find first-time sailors. This summer, about

250 children will spend a week or so on the Hudson as part of the eight-week program. And beginning this fall, the group will run an after-school program that will use the lessons of sailing to teach math and physics to public school students.

On Wednesday, the fierce wind augured a good day on the water, but Emanuel and his crew, all of whom participate in Fresh Youth Initiatives, a community service program in Washington Heights,

**For young crews,
adventures in
teamwork, outside
their comfort zone.**

had not yet mastered their boat. They ranged in age from 10 to 16, and some were barely tall enough to reach the delicate ropes hanging overhead.

It was their third outing of the week, and though they were accompanied by an instructor, they still felt unsure about some of the intricacies of navigating the Hudson by sail. Still, things seemed easier this time. They had memorized the sailing terms as they would the alphabet: bow, halcyon, starboard, stern. And hoisting the sails and rigging the jib sheets had become second nature.

After the voyage, the children reflected on their water skills

over peanut butter and jelly sandwiches.

Sholanly Ferreira, 16, said she was skeptical when she first thought about going sailing. She said she did not consider herself a "water girl" since she did not know how to swim and had only paddled on water a few times before. But by the end of the first day, she was eager to get on the water again and improve her skill in spotting oncoming boats.

"You need your team to work together," she said. "You can't do this by yourself, even if you learn everything."

Theovany Portes, 13, compared the teamwork required for sailing to the anatomy of an octopus. "We had one brain and lots of tentacles," he said, "and everyone was doing their own thing."

Theovany said he was scared when ripples caused by big barges caused the boat to seesaw. Before he looked at a sailboat up close for the first time, he said, he thought they were driven like cars, with wheels and gearshifts.

"It's something new, something I had never heard about," he said. "I feel a little bit more alive."

Jonathan Toribio, 12, said the program taught him discipline and not to be afraid of deep water.

"The river is calm; I love to get away from the city," he said, and counted the number of jellyfish he had seen that day. "Once it gets to the sea, though, I don't like it. I'm not too friendly with sharks."



RUBY WASHINGTON/THE NEW YORK TIMES

Hudson River Community Sailing, a nonprofit group, is introducing about 250 schoolchildren from Washington Heights to sailing through its inaugural summer program.