

Community Based Boat Building- A Basic Checklist

Last week was the *WoodenBoat* Show at Mystic Connecticut. It was a great time, as usual; but what struck me was how many groups are out there building boats with kids, families and community groups. It's wonderful because the rewards from the work are so great. That said, there's no reason folks should be "re-inventing the wheel." So, I'm going to use this space to post an article I wrote for a revised Community Boat Building Manual that never saw the light of day. I hope it is helpful.

Check List for Starting a Program:

- ✓ Identify the group you want to serve and its needs
- ✓ Find your best partners (Co-instructors, initial funders/sponsors, leaders of the selected group)
- ✓ Establish goals for the project
- ✓ Decide what type of environment best serves your goals (part of school system or not, apprenticeship, entrepreneurial, camp, community center, etc...)
- ✓ Select a boat that meets your goals
- ✓ Take care of the boring stuff (Insurance, materials, tools, space, etc...)
- ✓ Build the boat
- ✓ Measure Your Success and the kid's progress
- ✓ Get Press coverage for building and launch
- ✓ Teach the young people how to use the boat they built
- ✓ Celebrate the accomplishment with all parties involved. Do it in such a way that emphasizes the accomplished goals. This reenforces what the young people have done and learned.

Why build wooden boats with kids?

And, if you're going to do it,

What's the best way?

I get asked these questions a lot. Every day I go to work and try to figure out better answers. When somebody calls me for advice, they usually want to know how to get started building boats with kids. Being a former history major, I answer these questions with a question. "Why does your community need a boat building program?" A lot of times this brings them up short. They've been thinking about their potential work as being a boat building project rather than a community program. This kind of thinking can lead to the fatal mistake of building a boat and then not knowing what to do with it. I have checklist for starting such a program. (See above.) The first points are to identify your community's needs, forge partnerships and establish goals for the project. Essentially, start a program because it's needed and try to address specific problems.

What does community boat building have to offer?

If you're reading a *WoodenBoat* publication, you've probably been bitten by the "wooden boat bug." The experience of building something beautiful and then using it in cooperation with nature is something that appeals to you. Ben Fuller in a letter to the editor of *WoodenBoat* listed some of the skills we learn from small boats, "self-reliance, teamwork, forethought, honesty, endurance, tolerance and modesty." I would add showing up on time, following directions and learning to take responsibility and succeed. Everybody uses these skills in life and in the workplace. In my experience, experts in school to work and those trying to prevent drop outs, gangs, drug use and teen pregnancy hold these skills to be vitally important in the success of their programs. Building traditionally designed wooden boats also provides practical application of the math, science, history and English that young people learn in school.

I have a quote from Franklin Roosevelt in the office, "We cannot always build the future for our youth, but we can build our youth for the future." Anybody who observes their community sees that young people can benefit from some of the skills we listed above. It doesn't matter who or where these kids are. I've seen programs build boats with kids in Alaska, Hawaii and New York City. All these kids had similar needs inside themselves.

For most kids, even if they live near the water, boats and water are a foreign environment. To borrow an analogy from basketball... when you're building boats, the kids are playing on your court. They all start at the same basic level with no bad habits. You get to create your own environment with its own rules. (Safety First!) You have the opportunity to bring together groups that normally wouldn't associate. One of the more powerful breakthroughs in our shop occurred when we had a 17 year old recovery alcoholic lead a team of severely learning disabled apprentices. I know it sounds like a recipe for disaster, but it worked. The leader has stayed straight and the members of his team can get a job in this town as soon as they finish school.

The building process is very adaptable. We've worked with emotionally disturbed and severely learning disabled groups as well as gifted and talented. We've been able to tailor our programs to meet each group's needs. Success can be expanding a hull panel shape from a drawing or learning to hold and use a plane properly.

Building boats with young people is also unbelievably rewarding. When the light bulb goes off and a kid gets it, you get to re-experience the feeling when you got it right for the first time. "It" can be lofting, planking, sailing or reading a ruler. For me, it's a real high.

Get Partners

After you've identified the need, you have to find people to work with. You can't do this type of project alone, you'll become isolated, you'll burn out and the work won't be sustainable over the long run. So who do you work with? The answer is simple to say but hard to do. You work with the best. You find the best teachers, counselors, religious leaders, politicians, business people, fundraisers and volunteers. It's hard. It takes knowing your community and it takes time. For your first project, you need to find good people who will take a chance on working with you. Some of your partners should be knowledgeable about your community's needs whether it's job training, gang prevention, special education, math enrichment or environmental science.

Boats attract interesting people. These boaters, usually adults, end up being your best resource in a community based program. They're your volunteers, funders and instructors. Building a community base is critical to the survival of a program. You're not going to get everyone you need on the first project. Just make sure you create a team that can grow.

Establish Goals and Vision

You've gotten your team together to build a boat with kids. What are your goals? What do the kids walk away with? What do you walk away with? What rewards do the people who helped you get? What happens to the boat? What has building the boat done to further the program? Your goals should address your community's needs. You've got some expertise on your team. Use it. Find out what type of result is meaningful. "Self-esteem" is soft and fuzzy. Learning the basic job skills of following instructions and showing up on time for work is much more concrete. One of the major goals for a "first" project is to have successful "goods" to sell. A successful project will allow you to sustain the program. Remember, you define success when you determine your goals.

Goals are set project by project. Vision looks farther down the road. You need to be able to describe what you want your program to look like and what effects it will have on your community. A vision can range from a maritime history museum bringing a waterfront tourism and activity to a maritime trades center providing vocational training. It may be both or neither. It may be a summer camp. You have to decide and it's a team effort. Your partners' must "buy in" to the vision. The clearer your goals and vision the better you can describe your program. If your program works, having a clear vision and goals makes fundraising smoother because the benefits are easier to recognize.

Gut Check

Now you're getting a picture of what it takes to start a community program. Before you cut a piece of wood and get a group of kids and adults pumped up, do everybody a favor and take a "gut check." Do you really want to do this? You won't make any money. It's an emotional rollercoaster. It's frustrating. People will be blind to things that you see as obvious. If you're successful, you'll have a constant battle keeping the programs running and you'll probably be doing fundraising and administrative work- not much boat building. Are you ready for this?

Find the kids

Picking the right "first group" is vital to getting the program off the ground. Select a group that already exists, where the adults already do a good job with the kids. The adults in the group will know what the kids need. Make sure they have an integral part in setting the project's goals. This way your job is to build a boat safely and achieve your goals, not provide crowd control. These kids will become your best ambassadors with other young people and with the community at large.

Take care of the basic mundane things

You'll need shop space, tools, materials, liability insurance. Make sure these things are buttoned up before you start. For your first project, you may want to work under the umbrella of an existing organization that has some of these things. Schools, churches, municipalities are all

Getting Started

Potential instructors get tied up in knots over what the first day is going to be like. How you teach is up to you. Your technique will probably be a reflection of your personality. Each group I work with differently. With some, I explain the whole project, have them build models and then start cutting wood. With others, I put a pencil and tape measure in their hands, start calling out measurements and they have the boat laid out before they have the chance to decide that they can't build a boat. How you run your first session really depends on the group and the goals you have set. Don't think too much, it's only a boat.

Show the project off

Get people to see what you're doing while the boat is being built. Seeing young people build a boat is a more powerful image than seeing a finished boat sitting somewhere. Make sure that the press, community leaders, politicians and other potential groups see the work being done. It will excite them. Remember that if a tree falls in the forest and no one hears it- no one cares.

Jim Hsiang is from East Palo Alto California. He works with disadvantaged young people building furniture and boats. Jim has a drawing he calls the "Golden Triangle." Funders, providers and clients make up the corners of the triangle. In order for a program to be sustainable, you need strong links between all the sides. Funders must talk to the youth. Providers must be effective with the youth. At the same time, the providers must be willing and able to listen to and integrate feedback from all sides. Use this first project to get your triangle's links working.

Sometime during the planning stages, someone usually asks these two questions. So, I thought I'd give you my set answers.

Why boats?

Boat building is out of the ordinary. In most cases the kids aren't familiar with it and don't think they can succeed. Overcoming these hurdles is a tremendously powerful experience for these young people. Add to this the use of the boat which requires balancing the individual, the boat and Mother Nature in order to achieve a goal and you have a very powerful tool. Another similar experience can be found in building and flying kites. I just happen to like building boats. I'm vocationally impaired.

Why wood?

Wood is an accessible and adaptable material. The boat can be as simple as a "six hour canoe" or as complicated as a Herreshoff daysailer. The material is still wood. It's easily machined by basic, familiar tools. If the correct design is selected, the building process is accessible to any skill level. Usually, supplies are not impossible to find (depending upon design and location.)

Wood also makes an historical connection. Most of history's boat have been built of wood. Anywhere people met the water there were boats, usually of wood. This allows you to make a cultural connection with just about any type of group- from African Americans in Washington D.C. to Scandinavian farmers in Minnesota.

Of course when they ask you if you built the boat from scratch, you can say that you tried scratch but wood works better.

You've gone ahead, followed the check list and built the boat. What happens now?

Once the boat is built and the young people and adults involved have tasted success and realized some of the intended goals, what are you going to do with:

The Boat?

Sell it or use it. If the boat is sold, I see two basic routes. Sell it to help continue the program or sell it and have part of the money go back to the builders in some sort of entrepreneurial arrangement.

If the boat is to be used, there are plenty of options including: Community Sailing Rowing Program, Camp Programs, Livery, Club racing, experiential education.

(By the way, "Who owns it?") I see three choices- the kids, yourself or a sponsoring group.

The Kids?

You've shown them they can do something and you've taught them a bunch of other skills. The next step depends on your goals. One idea is that no one graduates, they just keep coming back until something better comes along. Another idea is to provide job placement and scholarships. Another is to set up your program so that the youngsters use the boats as a vehicle to independence. If you've been part of a school program, show how the boat building has improved their scores and attitudes. Make the link between practical application, education and future success. It's up to you.

The Adults?

If your program worked, you're going to have a bunch of pumped up adults. Find out what their interests are and try to dovetail them with your program's goals. That way there is "buy in." Personally, I hate committees and meetings, but you need some sort of organization for clear communication. People need to feel that they are accomplishing worthwhile goals. These folks are going to be your strongest day to day support. I wouldn't be able to run any programs without volunteer support.

Congratulations!

You now have the "goods to sell" to other groups and funders. Of course, the toughest part is taking the first step and making the commitment. Starting a boat building program is like starting a small business. If you're not careful it can eat you up.

John Gardner said ... "the way to preserve small craft is [to] get their reproductions out on the water, use them, wear them out and replace them anew... Historic small craft are for the young and old and the in-between. They are to use and enjoy, and to pass on for future generations to use and enjoy, ad infinitum. Preservation through use, in the long run, that is the only way."

So go build boats and use them! (And do it with kids) Why build boats? To paraphrase Guinness, "Boat Building is Good for You." What do you do with them after you're done? Whatever your community needs.