

The Young Shipwrights of Radcliffe Creek

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An enterprising boatbuilding program has students in Chestertown, Md., learning through doing.



Photography by John Western

“The Mary E. is like a second classroom,” says 11-year-old Jake Schengber, referring to a donated 48-foot 1933 Hooper Island draketail that he and other students at the Radcliffe School in Chestertown, Md., have been restoring this year. Fellow students Cory Hershberger, Kelsey Griffin and Shawn Goad all nod agreement. Their pride is evident—and well earned. When they got her, Mary E. was about as seaworthy as a sieve. Her bilge made five inches of water per hour. Now, thanks to caulking with cotton, red clay and linseed oil, the leakage is down to five inches a day. Pretty good for a 72-year-old.



The Radcliffe School’s innovative boatbuilding program is the brainchild of Jim Reynolds, who oversees a bustling maritime arts program for children with learning disabilities. Four days a week, Reynolds and the kids jump in his pickup truck and head for Green Point Landing in Wharton for 45 minutes of boat work. (Green Point Landing’s owner, Ray Clark, donates dockage to the school, not to mention plenty of helpful advice). At the marina Mary E. lies proud, sleek and graceful at the dock among the boxy cabin cruisers. “Hello draketail,” says Schengber as the students arrive. Reynolds boards first,

then lends a hand as the students, PFDs smartly fastened, leap onto Mary E. one by one across her rounded stern. Immediately they throw open the engine box and look deep into her bilge for water. Just an inch or two. No problem.

Moored beside Mary E. in the same enormous slip lie two finished school projects: a Bevin's skiff and a Smith Island crab scrape. The skiff is one of two built from kits the first year of the boatbuilding program. The other skiff was raffled off (and won by the proud father of one of its builders), earning enough money to buy materials to build the crab scrape, the school's second-year project.

The third-year project was a Chesapeake Bay log canoe, built from wood recycled from the school's old stage. "There's a lot to be said for having nothing to work with," Reynolds says. But alas, the interior-grade materials spelled doom for the 19-foot Miss Catherine. The vessel quickly delaminated after hitting the water. Numerous attempts at waterproofing, including a full coat of pitch, were futile. Reynolds shakes his head at the thought of his students wielding the tarry paintbrushes. "Painting ages me drastically," he says. The students always go home well daubed. "Fortunately," says Reynolds, "their parents are very patient." Today the gaily painted Miss Catherine lies on dry land near the school playground, a monument to important lessons learned.



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In the beginning, says Reynolds, who had no boatbuilding experience when he started, it was all he could do to stay one lesson ahead of the students. He researched construction techniques in books, on the internet and through interviews with local watermen. At first he used expensive marine bottom paint—



until watermen told him that Rustoleum would do the job just fine. It was difficult to sort through the myriad opinions volunteered whenever he hit a snag, but the pragmatic Reynolds has one sure way of knowing whose advice to take. “When somebody offers an opinion on how to do something, like caulking, and then backs it up with their tools, their materials and their time, that’s the way we go, right or wrong.”

Despite a tight budget, the Radcliffe Creek School community pulls together to keep the boatbuilding program afloat. Many of the materials are donated by the students’ parents. When funds are especially tight, Reynolds the boatwright reverts to Reynolds the artist and he sells a few of his original paintings. Then he donates the proceeds to bankroll the current vessel. Other austerity measures include building only one rudder and centerboard to share between several boats.

Though the boats will not last forever, the experience of learning by building something with their own hands will always stay with these students. Twelve-year-old Anna Caldwell already knows an important life lesson. “It takes a lot of time to finish a boat. You can’t rush it.” To learn more about the school, call 410-778-8150 or visit www.radcliffecreekschool.org.

—Robert Whitehill