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Students build boats, sail on Cooper River

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Under a steamy mid-morning sun, Jenise Rivera enjoyed a boat ride with some of her classmates Wednesday.

The eighth-grader, however, wasn't part of a school trip to the Cooper River to sail on rented boats. Rivera helped build the two 15-foot wooden boats she and her classmates sailed for the first time.

"It was cool, very nice," said Rivera, wearing a red life jacket after stepping onto the floating pier at the Cooper River Yacht Club. "It is kind of amazing we actually built them and now are sailing on them."

Rivera, who lives in Westville, and seven other middle school students from the UrbanPromise School in East Camden participated in the Urban BoatWorks program. They spent the winter sanding, stitching, epoxying and painting the double-ended, single sailboats made of marine mahogany plywood.

"I can't believe they had the ability to learn something like this," said Denise Rivera, the mother of Jenise. "It is amazing they can do this."

They built the sailboats from kits in the basement of the Camden Seaport and Maritime Museum in South Camden.

"We have a new \$40,000 boat shop at the museum," said Michael Lang, the director of the museum, "so this is a long-term commitment to this type of program for city kids."

The project is part of UrbanPromise's mission to equip children and young adults with skills needed for academic achievement and life management. Urban BoatWorks is an extension of the expeditionary learning promoted by the Urban Trekkers, an outdoor program of UrbanPromise.

"I would love to be a doctor. I love to work with people," said Jenise Rivera. "And when you are a doctor, you use your hands and building the boats helps you to sharpen your skills using your hands."

The Urban BoatWorks program set sail in August when the after-school program built three 12-foot-long wooden rowboats. Faith, Hope and Promise were launched into the Cooper River, setting new horizons for a new group of students to build the sailboats Monarch and Journey, which they sailed Wednesday.

"A lot of kids in Camden want to be engaged in their education," said Jesus Castro, the director of Urban BoatWorks. "To be in a program to widen the scope of what they can learn is insanely rewarding."

These students started the latest project in early October. They worked in split shifts with four students building on Mondays and the other four constructing on Wednesdays. They put in more than 100 hours.

Throughout the winter, the students attended classroom sessions on sailing. They also received sailing lessons from the Cooper River Yacht Club.

"We are really hoping some of the students continue with lessons throughout the summer," said Jim Cummings, director of Urban Trekkers. "A big part of this is developing an on-water program. It is great to build boats, but the objective is to get on the water and enjoy what you built."

The boats are scheduled to be launched officially on July 10 at the Cooper River Yacht Club, after which children from the program plan to sail them regularly.

"It was a great experience," Charleston Clark, a seventh-grader from Pennsauken, said of building the boats. "I would do it again."

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