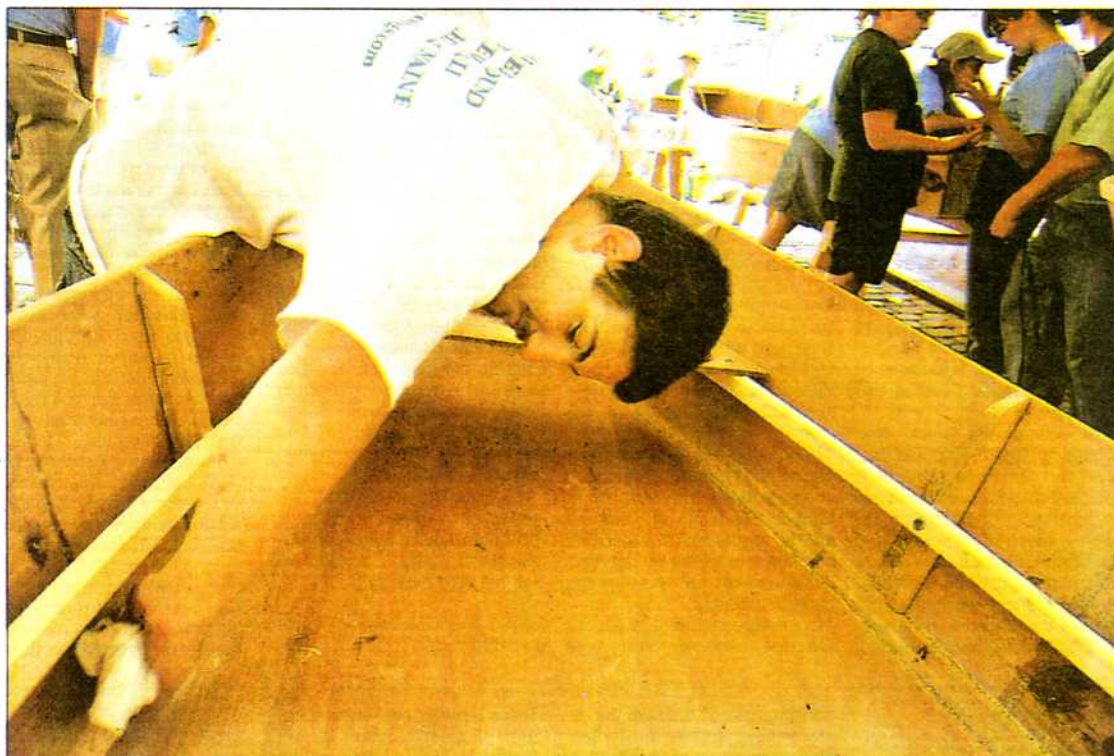


STAYING AFLOAT



Gregory Rec/Staff Photographer

Above, James Leighton cleans out a boat on July 17 that he and others with the group Back on Track built during the Compass Project's boatbuilding festival in Portland.

Youth group builds more than a boat

By JUSTIN ELLIS
Staff Writer

It started off as a few pieces of wood, and someone said it was going to be a boat.

As in, water-tight-and-floats-in-deep-water, boat.

The guys from Back on Track were not sure about this.

It's not that they weren't good with their hands, but building a boat is different.

Yet the Compass Project insisted that a boat could be built in three days — plenty of other groups have done it.

Still, the group from Back on Track, which helps young people who have been in and out of the juvenile justice system, had their reservations.

"We nicknamed it 'Sinkin,'" said James Leighton.

Over the span of three days last week, they managed to turn out at 12-foot Bevins skiff, just like the rest of the youth groups and nonprofits taking part in the annual boatbuilding project.

Though the basic goal behind the project is to produce something seaworthy, members of Back on Track and people from the Compass Project say participants learn a lot more.

Since it was created in 2004, Back on Track has worked with kids in probation or other parts of the juvenile justice food chain to help them find ways to get at the causes of what got them an early look at the corrections system.

Working in groups the kids — between 13 and 18 — try to get at what decisions and actions led them to where they are today. More recently, the program also started an anger-management component.



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NXT: THE NEXT GENERATION

Leighton, 19, originally went through Back on Track after a string of problems associated with drug and alcohol abuse.

"After the first time, I requested to come back again," he said.

Now he works with similar young people going through the same steps he went through.

Leighton said he had fun with the boatbuilding and teamwork aspects of the project.

Though he wasn't entirely sure about the boat at first, he likes its chances.

"It looks pretty good as long as no one drops it during the loading," Leighton said.

While some of the groups that participate in the Compass Project keep their boats, others sell them or raffle them off as a way to raise money. Back on Track will be holding a fundraiser at Flatbread Company in Portland on Aug. 7, where they plan to raffle off the skiff.

The program now serves between 150 and 200 kids a year, according to Kirsten Milliken, executive director of Back on Track.

Milliken said the goal for Back on Track is to see the kids in the program again once they are finished. She said it's unreasonable to think that someone can be completely free of their bad behaviors, which is why it's important to check in on a regular basis. Milliken said working with the Com-

pass Project is a way for the youths to put into practice the things they learn in the program.

It may not always be apparent how what they are learning will make difference, but in making a boat, they have a more tangible result, she said.

"We have a finished product now," she said. "That's huge for these guys in three days."

Bear Shea, an instructor with Back on Track, said there was a real transformation for the kids working on the boat, who went from no interest in boats to showing up early to work on the boat's keel.

Working with at-risk youth is not easy for most people, in some ways because all teenagers feel the need to challenge authority, he said. And that's not easy to deal with.

"I feel like adolescents are one of the last groups to get lost in the cracks," Shea said.

The finished boat, ready for launch with the rest at East End Beach, was named the "S.S. Hedon." It's a bit of an inside joke, Shea said, a play on the hedonistic impulses that Back on Track works with kids to fight.

If there's an analogy about how making boats is like working with young people, it's not entirely clear. But Shea says any steps — if it's working in a classroom or using power tools — can make all the difference in how they see themselves and the world.

"It's the last place to help someone make changes before they get stuck in the ruts of adulthood," he said.

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