

‘Hope floats’ July 10 from Cooper River

Tue, Jul 6, 2010

By Katie Morgan | The Moorestown Sun

A group of kids in Camden, with the help of some good-hearted Moorestown volunteers, are bringing new meaning to “hope floats.”

Dave Schill, John Coles, Tom Kulp and Doug Sell have been working with Urban Promise since last fall, helping a group of seven students build two sailboats.

The finished boats, named Journey and Monarch, will set sail July 10 from the Cooper River Yacht Club, each with a crew of two students.

Schill, Coles, Kulp and Sell work with a branch of Urban Promise called Urban Trekkers, an organization devoted to expeditionary learning. “We try to create an adventure in the learning process,” Director Jim Cummings said.

The Urban Trekkers take part in countless outdoor adventures, from kayaking to rock climbing, and last summer began a program called Urban Boatworks.

Students from the Urban Promise Charter School began participating in the program in the fall, preparing to construct, and eventually sail, the two boats.

Schill, who grew up racing sailboats in Avalon, has been in the Navy for 40 years, and has sailed all over the world.

“The kids had no idea initially what they were getting into,” Schill said. “First we taught them to sand the wood, even though they hated it.”

Sell has been building boats for 13 years: “It’s not always a bed of roses,” he said. “Sometimes you just want to say, ‘Here, let me do that.’”

“But the bottom line is, we didn’t build these boats. The kids built these boats.”

Students began swimming lessons after school, and each passed a swim test and took classroom sailing lessons before learning to sail.

“These are students who have struggled academically,” Cummings said. “They’ve met with a lot of challenge, and not a lot of opportunities to learn creatively. This is a way to get kids excited about learning without them realizing that there’s an academic component to what they’re doing.”

There were originally 10 students in the program, but only seven finished. Schill hopes the students that stayed on learned a valuable lesson.

“To acquire a goal, you have to put in the effort,” he said. “They had to do the work, and it wouldn’t get done unless they did. I hope that comes back to them later in life.”

Cummings called the program a “good opportunity to share a lot of learning disciplines.”

The students learned to work with tools, read measurements and blueprints, and do certain types of math problems. They were also educated about the history of Camden.

“Here’s a city surrounded by water with a rich maritime history,” Cummings said. “We shared with the kids just how much the water played a part in the history of their city.”

Cummings is impressed with the ambition and work ethic of the students.

“A year-long project is a long time for seventh and eighth graders,” he said. “It’s wonderful to see how they’ve grown. I think they’ve all had the experience of a lifetime.”

Both Schill and Sell plan to continue to participate in the program in coming years.

“It’s very rewarding for us, the volunteers,” Schill said. “And when you get down to it, the boats are works of art.”

Residents are invited as the students launch the boats from 9:30-11:30 a.m. on July 10 at the Cooper River Yacht Club. Refreshments will be served. For more information, contact Cummings at jcumings@urbanpromiseusa.org or Jesus Castro at jcastro@urbanpromiseusa.org.