

Sailing comes to DC's other river

ANDY EGGERS

The Anacostia has long been Washington's neglected river. While the Potomac boasts parks, monuments, and historic port cities, the Anacostia conjures images of urban blight and industrial decay.

In the last year, though, white sails have made an appearance on the overlooked waterway, thanks to DC Sail and Kids Set Sail, two fledgling sailing programs run by the National Maritime Heritage Foundation. Operating out of a converted Pepco pumphouse located 20 blocks directly south of the Capitol, these programs are providing kids and adults from across DC a chance to sail in the backyard of the nation's capital.

Thacher Tiffany, a 26-year old former competitive sailor, runs DC Sail, the adult program that offers evening sailing lessons on weeknights. At 6 pm each night he welcomes a crew of aspiring sailors and

urban adventure-seekers to the Matthew Henson Center at 2000 Half Street, SW. After collecting life jackets and sails, everyone heads down to the dock and listens as Tiffany gives out instructions on basic boat safety and rigging. In a few minutes, the boats are deemed sea-worthy and push off, headed away from the power stations and warehouses of industrial DC and toward Haines Point.

"I love sailing, and I love to pass on that love to people who are new to it," Tiffany says. He leads his crews through basic sailing maneuvers, peppering his sailing instructions with comments about the occasional riverbank wildlife, architecture at Fort McNair, and the city's development plans for the Anacostia area. "It's a view of this city that most people never see," says Tiffany. "You really get a sense of what an overlooked resource this river is."

On summer days, Kids Set Sail, the sister program of DC Sail, takes over the Anacostia. Run by Duncan Hood and partially funded by the proceeds from DC Sail, Kids Set Sail provides children from the neighborhoods surrounding the river the opportunity to learn sailing. The program hopes to get 150 kids onto the water this summer. "We try to do two things at Kids Set Sail," says Hood. "We introduce kids to sailing, which mainly means teaching them how to work as a team to sail a boat. At the same time, we want them to appreciate this natural resource that is in their backyard. And meanwhile, of course, have fun!"

The city's planning office is pleased to see DC Sail and Kids Set Sail establish a presence on the river. "DC Sail is successfully demonstrating what a tremendous resource the Anacostia River is to this city," says Andy Altman, director of DC's Office of Planning. "The future of the river isn't just about real estate - it's about citizens, young and old, discovering or rediscovering what a treasure this river is. By offering sailing opportunities to young people and adults DC Sail is making the future of the river visible."

Bringing sailing to the Anacostia was made possible through the joint efforts of a number of players. The idea began with a group of young Brookings Institution research assistants, including Tiffany, who were interested in establishing a community sailing center in the District. Their efforts attracted the attention of Rich O'Brien, who had established Kids Set Sail in Annapolis, and the

National Maritime Heritage Foundation, which was seeking out new ways to promote sailing education. The combination of inspiration, experience, and financial resources made the current programs possible.

DC Sail and Kids Set Sail are currently in their second year and operate on a modest scale, borrowing space and maintaining only five boats. Ten years from now, they hope to have established a permanent community sailing center patterned after successful programs on the Charles River in Boston and in Baltimore's Inner Harbor. "It's one thing for the river to include a boat ramp or a marina, both of which cater to boat owners," explains Tiffany. "Community sailing is different because it offers people the chance to try out sailing without making an enormous financial commitment. And it provides benefits to more people for the same amount of riverbank."

Despite all the talk about the impending revitalization of the Anacostia waterfront area, not much change is yet visible. DC Sail's sailboats share the river with sand barges destined for Anacostia's gravel yard, and the fledgling sailing center's closest neighbor is an aging power plant. But the arrival of sailing on the Anacostia is one sign that the river is taking on new life. "One of the exciting things here is that recreation is leading the way," says Uwe Brandes, Project Manager of the Anacostia Waterfront Initiative. "As much as we see tons of potential for this area, some people still tend to think of the Anacostia as an urban wasteland. But the sailing community is out ahead of that and recognizing that this is an outstanding resource for everyone."

For more information about DC Sail, see www.dcsail.org. For more information on Kids Set Sail, see www.nmhf.org/KidsSetSail. Both programs are part of the National Maritime Heritage Foundation, www.nmhf.org.



Photos by Kennward Ward