

Navigating by smokestack

Navigating from one picturesque lighthouse to the next is common practice among sailors in New England, but that isn't how it works in the industrial city of Lawrence, Massachusetts. Students at the Greater Lawrence Community Sailing Program learn to sail by taking a quick visual fix on one of several smokestacks looming on the horizon. There is an urban landscape, but the rest is the same—open water, fresh breezes and the joy of making a boat get up and go by filling its sails with wind.

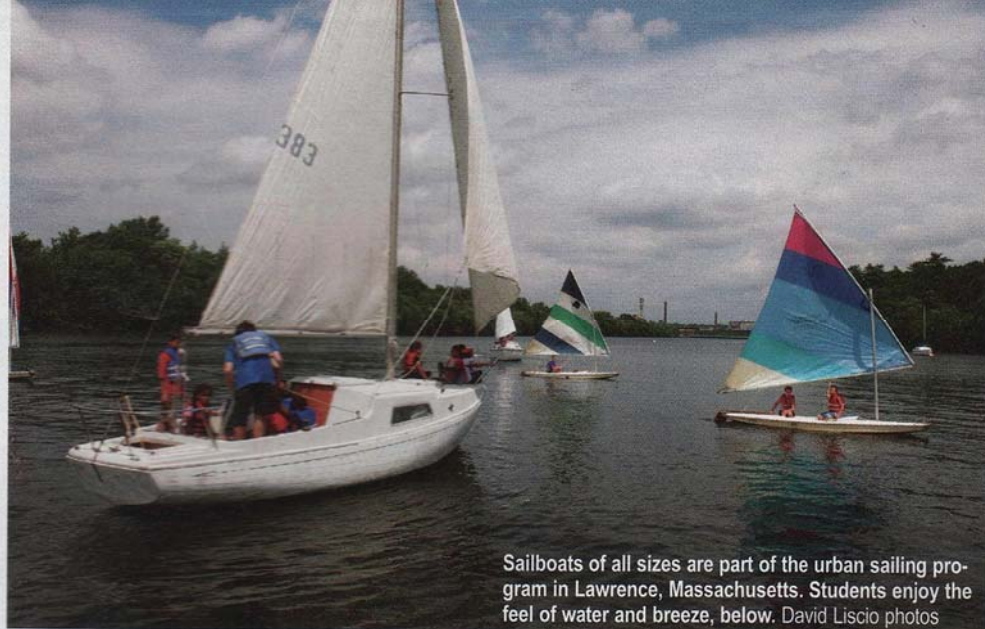
Founded in 1978 by a group of local businessmen, the program has introduced thousands of children, 77% from low-income families, to a sport they otherwise would not likely have encountered.

"Most of their parents are not sailors. In fact, we know that nine out of 10 families we service have no history with boating or



sailing whatsoever, unless they were in this program themselves as kids," said Executive Director Jed Koehler, whose father, Peter, ran the program for more than two decades.

On a balmy August day, Koehler and his core group of instructors as they headed out onto the Merrimack River for the next round of lessons. The students ranged in age from 6 to 18. The younger ones boarded the big boats, a donated 22-foot Catalina, a battered 24-foot Bermuda Islander sloop and a 20-foot Aquarius named *Happy Tack*.



Sailboats of all sizes are part of the urban sailing program in Lawrence, Massachusetts. Students enjoy the feel of water and breeze, below. David Liscio photos

"If they're brand new to the program or if they can't swim, they're always with an instructor," said Bruce Baril, president of the city's community boating board of directors. "Last year, we had 4,650 kids come through and we're already ahead of that this year. Nearly every one gets introduced to sailing."

According to Baril, the students test their skills at sailing a Sunfish, a Hobie cat or the Cape Cod Mercury.

"We graduate them slowly, first with only the mainsail on the Mercury and then we add the jib," he said. "We go through every level from US Sailing. We don't believe in telling a child you have failed a class," he said.

Although the summer program tuition is only \$50 for sailing lessons Monday through Friday with lunch included, many of the students cannot afford it. "No kid gets refused," said Baril. "We're open to everyone and if they can't pay, we get them

a scholarship so they can come for free."

The program located at Riverfront State Park subsists on grants and on donations of cash and equipment, including boats and motors. Its long-term waterfront lease with the city, authorized by the Massachusetts legislature this past summer for another 25 years, ensures the next generation of kids from Lawrence's tougher neighborhoods will get out on a sailboat.

Abe Bashara, who owned Bishop's restaurant in Lawrence, and fellow busi-

nessman Tom Lane, created the program in the mid-1970s. They pitched a tent along the riverbank and launched with modest funds and an even more humble fleet. Lane eventually donated the land on which the Abe Bashara Boathouse was built in 1990.

"We had a trailer and now we have this," said Baril, sweeping an arm toward the impressive, 12,000-square-foot boathouse where thousands of children spend their summer days. "We teach the kids and we also run adult classes, it's \$175 a season for the whole family."

The docks at midday were teeming with kids like Alex Guzman, 11, of nearby Methuen, who said sailing makes him feel like a pirate.

Kevin Sandoval, 11, added, "The boat goes slow and then it goes very fast. But the best part is it's peaceful."

Stephanie Dunbar, 12, of North Andover, was attracted to the speed. "I like it when the boat is going fast and you feel the wind passing by," she said. "That's my favorite part."

But it was capsizing that did it for fledgling sailor Anthony Mears, 9, of Lawrence, who clearly enjoyed being in the water more than on the boat.

Koehler hopes to introduce the students to 420 dinghy racing, and over the summer hosted an on-site sailing clinic conducted by the Pleon Yacht Club from Marblehead, Massachusetts.

"The good thing about it is anybody can sail here," said Madeline Rahme, 17, who has worked as an instructor for three years but began taking sailing lessons at age nine. "Most of the kids want to learn, so the hardest part of the program is repairing the boats." --David Liscio