



Feature: My City

## **All Hands On Deck! PASA Kids Tackle Ocean State Waters at the Community Boating Center**



COMMUNITY BOATING CENTER  
INDIA POINT PARK, PROVIDENCE

Kids in the Creative Capital don't stop learning after they've left their classrooms for the summer. Here, they seek out those extended learning opportunities from a whole host of places – the gym, the kitchen, the stage, and for some lucky ones, the waters off India Point Park.

Early this month, Mayor Cicilline kicked off the first series of summer programs offered in partnership with the Providence After School Alliance (PASA). Among those community organizations working hard to provide educational lessons this summer through PASA is the Community Boating Center (CBC).

At the helm of the CBC is cofounder and executive director John O'Flaherty who, along with a small group of sailing enthusiasts and volunteers, built this locally treasured boathouse nearly fifteen years ago so that young people like Kevin Paz (who'll be attending Bridgham Middle School next year) can learn how to sail a boat.

Over time, they've succeeded in reaching thousands of young, eager sailors who've been given a chance to tackle the waters of the Ocean State. This week, City News went ashore with the captain and a young aspiring member of his crew to learn more about what they have aboard ship this summer.

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### **How did you learn about PASA AfterZones?**

Kevin: They mailed me a flyer. It had good stuff in it and so I decided to join!

### **Why did you want to learn about sailing?**

Kevin: I wanted to learn about sailing the ocean.

### **Have you ever sailed before?**

Kevin: Yes, with my uncle.

### **What are some of the skills you've learned so far?**

Kevin: I'm learning about the parts of the boat. I'm also learning how to drive the boat and how to put the jib on.

### **Can you tell us more about what the PASA Summer AfterZone kids are learning this summer at the CBC?**

John: We're really a hands-on program. It's all experiential learning. We believe that the kids should be responsible for their own boats, not just the sailing part. We're not just taking people out for rides. They're responsible for getting the boats together and the teamwork that's involved in actually physically getting the boats to the water, figure out who's going to drive the boat first and where they're going to go. The unique thing about sailing and being on the water is that there are no roads to follow. So they have to learn how to follow instructions and meet us out on the course by themselves.

They're learning how to actually sail the boats so we're not just sailing in circles. They're driving the boats. The great part about that is that they're highly motivated because they have to get the boat back at the end of the day. So it's the full gamut about sailing. It's really a lot about leadership and responsibility, other than learning a few sailing skills.

### **What do you enjoy most about this program?**

Kevin: I like sailing the waters. It's fun sailing.

### **Why do you think it's important that young people keep active and busy in the summer?**

John: We're competing against a lot of things that really aren't always available in seasonal climates like Rhode Island. And in the Ocean State, we can't think of a better activity for kids to be doing in the summertime than having the chance to get on the water.

It's important to give them the opportunity to get outside versus sitting at home playing video games. It's important to give them the opportunity to work with other kids their age, teach them leadership skills, and show them the dynamics that happen when you put three or four kids together in a team.

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### **What do you want them to take away from the experience?**

John: It's important to us that not only are they learning how to sail properly but that there is a method used and/or lessons that are sinking in, perhaps even under the radar, so that not only are they leaving on a daily basis with a skill set they can bring home but hopefully some of those skills are also transferable to other things that they'll be doing in their daily lives or in school.

Additionally, there's a lot of skill building that happens here that kinda' sinks in afterwards and later on in life. Some of those things are difficult to measure – teamwork, leadership skills, and academic skills – often come out later on. Maybe when they go back to learn mathematics at school, they could take with them some of the geometry they learned here in navigating from one point to another.

Every day that they are steering the boat with a tiller and actually using a lever, they are learning about the physics of sailing. So when they are learning mathematical or physics applications in school, it could be easier for them to remember how to apply those lessons if they can refer back to what they learned in sailing. They can say, 'Oh, yes, I've done that before and it works.'" It's easier for them, in other words, to relate to those academic concepts.

### **How do you think what you're learning here will help you in school?**

Kevin: Because if they ask you questions about it, you'll know how to answer them.

### **The majority of the youth that participate in your programs come from urban areas, and a unique opportunity like sailing might not be as easily accessible as other opportunities. How do you think this experience impacts them?**

John: Most of the kids that come through our program have a very similar reaction. They don't have a lot of experience in the water. It's just something they didn't grow up with versus some other people who may have grown up with the experience whether they're on vacation or on a regular basis. Some of our youth have that experience but still the vast majority does not. So it's a tremendous opportunity for them to try something that they may not have the chance to try.

Beyond that, what's really more important is that because it's not a familiar scene for them, there's a fear factor that's involved. And we see the same reaction every year – where on the first day, their eyes are a little bit wide open, there's a fear of stepping in to a boat, and what's gonna' happen to me, why did I choose this program. But once they get in to the water then everything changes. All of a sudden it's, 'I've been empowered to do this and I can do this!' You see it in their posture and in their faces. Then the opposite reaction happens where we almost have to the nudge them to get off the water! It's wonderful to see that transformation in them.

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### **How did you become involved in the Community Boating Center?**

John: We started in 1994. I was on the board of directors at that time as a volunteer director of operations. So I hired the staff, came up with the curriculum and the programming, and bought all the boats. We built all the docks and the first boathouse here by ourselves. It took a lot of donated boats and elbow grease to get it together.

### **So you can tell us a little bit more about why this organization was formed.**

John: It's really as simple as a core group of people feeling that Providence being the capital of the Ocean State really deserved to have a community boating center. In Providence, in particular, the kids really needed it more than anybody else. This is a wonderful place to facilitate that and to make it happen. It made sense to us to give that demographic this opportunity.

### **How many kids have you served?**

John: We put just over 750 kids through the program last year alone. That's through a combination of our outreach programs, our summer youth lessons, and our after school program which we've grown enormously through the last 4 to 5 years. In particular, we've really gone after the after-school market. We started more as a summer program and now our after school program rivals our summer offering.

### **How has your partnership with PASA helped your organization?**

John: We're huge PASA fans. They help us in a way that is often hard to measure. When you start talking about continuous improvement, the importance of quality standards, and how that helps you as an organization, it's not always a season-to-season measurement. PASA has really helped us forge relationships and systems that have helped strengthen our delivery and reach to the public school system.

### **So what's next for the CBC?**

John: Depends on the day! We feel like we've only scratched the surface. We've experienced tremendous growth and we're happy and excited about expanding. We keep getting new boats and our programs expand every year. We're hiring more instructors and we're reaching more kids. Our next goal is to increase our high school attendance. Through PASA we've had a lot of success reaching middle school, which was very difficult for us to access prior to PASA's involvement. We're excited to work with them again to use the same standards, principles, and tactics to help the high school market achieve the same accomplishments and get access to the water and a true unique opportunity in Providence that we think they're really enjoy.

### **Any bit of sailing wisdom that you share with the kids?**

John: The wind changes all the time and you need to be flexible. There are a lot of lessons in that flexibility that can be used throughout your life.

Would you recommend that other young people participate in PASA programs? Why?

Kevin: Yes, I would tell them how fun it is and that they get to drive the boat.