

Classroom on the water: Sailing nonprofit teaches kids about the bay

A local organization wants more children to be familiar with the ways the San Francisco Bay shapes their lives.



Captain Andrew Pape points out the direction they are headed after a lesson in steering a sailboat in the cockpit aboard the 82' schooner *Seaward* in the Oakland Estuary, Calif., on Wednesday, Aug. 9, 2017. The nonprofit Call of the Sea takes school children for a three-hour sails around the Bay to inspire and teach young people about marine ecology, maritime history and teamwork. (Laura A. Oda/Bay Area News Group)

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More than a million children call the San Francisco Bay Area home, regularly criss-crossing the bridges and freeways that connect the region. But only around 5 percent of them have ever actually been out on the bay itself.

The nonprofit [Call of the Sea](#) is looking to change that.

Founded in 1984, the organization partners with schools and youth groups to take local children on sailing trips around the San Francisco Bay. In the last decade or so, about 60,000 youngsters have set sail on the 82-foot schooner, *Seaward*. But in 2018, the nonprofit will finish construction of the *Matthew Turner*, a 132-foot brigantine set to carry some 10,000 children each year out onto the water.

The organization is “not looking to create a bunch of sailors,” said Andrew Pape, the soft-spoken captain of the *Seaward*. Instead, with school funding tight and the number of field trips seeming to [trend downward](#) in recent years, the organization wants to educate kids about a body of water that deeply impacts their lives but that might not come up in a traditional classroom setting.

“Most of them, this is their first time,” said Malina Ly, who was supervising a group of elementary- and middle-school aged kids attending an Oakland Parks and Recreation camp that went for a spin on the *Seaward* on Wednesday morning.

“This boat is very different than a classroom. It moves around!” said Anna Yoors, the head educator, as she gathered the children near the docks at Jack London Square ahead of the trip.

After a safety review, the children donned life jackets and clambered aboard, some a little more eagerly than others. “Is there some sort of hanging on spot?” asked one nervous boy. “What if you get seasick?” worried a little girl.

Soon enough, though, the children didn’t have time to be concerned. There were sails to hoist and knots to tie and nooks to explore. “Let’s play tug of war,” urged one of the crew members as the children pulled a rope hand over hand as they’d been taught moments before and watched a sail unfurl in awe.

“I love it,” breathed Eileen Ma, 9, as the boat picked up speed and San Francisco loomed into view in the distance.

“I feel like a true crew member,” declared Kongtae Kaewsalam, also 9.

While the *Seaward* made its way out of the estuary toward the Bay Bridge, past the shipping containers piled high along the port (“What do you think is in there?” mused one little girl), the children divided into teams and fanned out across the deck.

One group scooped up plankton with a net while another spread out laminated maps of the bay and learned how to decode where they were and where they were headed. For some, it was their first time seeing a real paper map. A separate group learned to tie figure eights and barrel knots, while another got to try steering the boat with Pape after a quick tutorial on how rudders work.

“That was my favorite!” exclaimed Robert O’Grady, a precocious 11-year-old, of his chance to pilot.

Almost without realizing it, the children got a science lesson, a history lesson and a math lesson all rolled into one. And there’s nothing like trying to control a sailboat streaking through the water on a cold, blustery day to reinforce the value of team work and the rules of cause and effect.

As the schooner passed below the Bay Bridge, the kids shouted gleefully into the wind, hoping to hear an echo. But then, as they turned back toward Oakland, the children spread out across the deck and spent five wordless minutes feeling the waves jostle the boat, listening to the cars whiz by overhead, peering into the distance and generally soaking it all in.

Not a single child broke the silence.

Later, after he’d docked, Pape watched the group climb back onto the dock. “I hope they get a better understanding of this water near their homes,” he said.

For some of the kids at least, the three-hour trip seemed to unlock new dreams.

“I had fun,” said Justin Jihad, 11. “Actually, I might want to work here one day.”