

Q & A WITH SHANNON SHEA

TWA members and others are talking to writer Sharon Babcock about enduring inspirations, life lessons, and perspectives from their experiences on the working waterfront.

*This month's feature: **Shannon Shea**, executive director of Tacoma Community Boat Builders.*



Just three months into her new role as the first executive director of Tacoma Community Boat Builders, Shannon Shea works with at-risk young men to teach them a highly functional art, a craft, and a tradition. Shea and her colleagues work with teens from the Pierce County juvenile justice system as they build and sail small wooden boats under the expert guidance of older craftsmen.

In the shop filled with wood and power tools on the Thea Foss Waterway, building boats leads to the question of “What else can I make with my hands?”

Q: Why were you hired?

A: I come from a long tradition of building community and was raised with encouragement to “give all you have in superabundance.” I come with no knowledge of the machines used in boat-building or what they are capable of. My academic training taught me to focus on the thing a person has the potential to become. I was hired to nurture and grow that potential in the multiple generations who gather in this place around boat-building. The organization needed someone as its first executive director who is intrepid. With a background and experience in social intervention programs for vulnerable populations, I bring a willingness to take risks, and to take on a start-up venture, maybe better described as an up-start venture. With my background, I bring the kernel of wisdom a Nigerian mentor instilled in me that to teach is a service to the community. I believe in encouraging a culture where every child is responsible to every adult—and every adult is responsible to every child, even if it’s not yours. Hope, family, and community come together naturally when building boats.

Q: What are the risks and payoffs of your taking this position?

A: The payoff is the feeling of fulfillment I have each day when leaving here, even if I’m tired. The organization took a risk on me in bringing in an outsider. I have not lived in the South Sound, so I will need to establish the relationships required to secure buy-in and support for the work. I take a risk because in a new organization, there is no infrastructure backing me. I am used to having the program support systems a university can provide—people who can open doors, employees, and equipment. In a start-up, the executive director does everything from hands-on cleaning to prospecting for grants to thinking about the best way to write an upcoming report

that is due in two days to on-the-spot relationship problem-solving with the youth and their mentors.

Q: Who are the people you work with in the program?

A: They are Pierce County court-involved young men, ages 13-18, from Remann Hall who need an alternative to where they are in their lives. We provide a space where they can come together to learn and be a part of something bigger than themselves and very importantly, a diverting activity during the hours when they normally get into trouble--with the intention of reducing their repeat offenses. Those offenses range from running away from home to armed robbery and assault. Often there is an attention deficit disorder diagnosis or something like it; many are in foster care. The mentors are 30- to 50-year-olds who really enjoy being here to share knowledge, experience and wisdom with younger generations. One takes off early from work as a boat-building foreman on two afternoons a week to do it, sacrificing his hourly salary. The crusty older guys want to work here even in the cold. With this and other diverting programs, Remann Hall has significantly reduced the number of youths who need to be jailed.

Q: Why no young women?

A: We were founded as an answer to Arts Connect, a program already in existence for girls involved in the juvenile justice system. I eventually see young women and even families of the youth participating in boat-building here.

Q: What are the program's activities you are proudest of?

A: We start each day with a check-in. It involves each person, young and old, offering what is going on that day in their life and something emotive—(what is the one item you would save from your burning house?). Then we sit down together at a large table to eat a lunch provided by Pierce County. Those two things—disclosure and eating together are basic to community and trust-building.

Our three basic guidelines for when we are in the shop: safety, respect, and challenge -- accepting that challenge is a part of boat building and most things worthwhile. After a boat is finished, those who helped to build it have the joy of getting onto the water in a safe vessel they helped to create.

It is a tightly structured environment that the young people who are here sometimes choose for themselves and sometimes have mandated for them. In a practical sense, participants learn shop and safety skills, responsibility, planning, problem-solving, discipline, water safety, small boat handling, and maritime culture.

What makes me happy is that along with reduced recidivism the work done here leads to expanded horizons, strategic thinking, self-confidence, better decision-making, higher employability, and positive participation in the community. It is a “way through” for these young men. They learn how to shift out of crisis mode and into a more steady, intentional path that is team-centered and encourages empathy, altruism, and optimism. They learn the value of goal-setting and develop a sense of accomplishment in an experiential environment of

adventure and exploration. After they are around awhile, either by choice or not, they just start caring. Sometimes they bring their family members to look at what they are building.

Q: What is your biggest worry?

A: How to fund this organization to the level it needs for lasting long into the future.

Q: Who cares about what happens here?

A: Pierce County juvenile courts, others who work with young people, anyone who knows the power of working with your hands and that it can be a transformative experience, people who grew up without the benefit of this kind of opportunity.

Q: What is your hope for these youth?

A: That 20 years from now they will have continued on their own to divert the path they are currently on and will have stayed out of trouble. That they will be people who lead their own lives with intention and are a part of a community; people who teach their own children the value of being a part of a community and knowing and working side-by-side with other generations in it. That they will flourish.