

Q & A WITH JAN ADAMS

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: Jan Adams from the Foss Waterway Seaport.

Jan Adams is the education director at the Foss Waterway Seaport. She leads land- and boat-based education programs to enrich students' understanding of marine ecology and the maritime history of the Tacoma region, and the importance of the waters of Puget Sound.



The Foss Waterway Seaport celebrates Tacoma's maritime heritage. It is located on the Thea Foss Waterway in the Balfour Dock Building, a century-old wooden warehouse that is the oldest remaining intact building linked to Tacoma's commercial and industrial maritime beginning. It is the last remaining segment of what was known as the "mile-long wheat warehouse" and is a tangible link to the trading history of Washington.

Built for cargo arriving by rail and departing by sail during Tacoma's early years, its last commercial occupant left the building in the mid-1970s. The building slowly rotted away until 1996 when it was rediscovered by boating and history buffs who recognized the value the building could add to Tacoma's rebirth and the region's understanding of its history and environment. Since 2003, the Foss Waterway Seaport organization has been renovating the building for long-term community educational and recreational use.

The Foss Waterway Seaport gives students the opportunity to see Tacoma's original port, to understand the impact that urbanization has had on Tacoma, and to develop an understanding of the environmental issues faced by those living near Puget Sound. Inside the historic building visitors get a close up look at heritage small watercraft and maritime tools; can spend time aboard the Columbia River Gillnetter Faith, a sea experience securely moored on land; and can enjoy marine and environmental science activities offered in the education classroom complete with instructional touch tanks—where specimens of live and healthy sea starfish still exist even though their population is vastly diminished in West Coast. Jan expertly changes out the water in the tanks every six days.

Q: What drew you to your involvement in this work?

A: I taught in Department of Defense schools in Europe and then went back to school for a master's degree in media design. I first became connected to the Foss Waterway Seaport by doing the museum's website, photography and graphics.

Q: How have the education programs evolved?

A: Since 2004 we have found appropriate boats to use for floating classrooms, (boats) that have two heads, allow students to be inside, to spread out and be comfortable on two levels, and to accomplish the science we are on the water to do. We have expanded the program year upon year. This year we added family programs, testing what we can do in winter, even without heat in the building. Using artists, engineers, and teachers, we are piloting a student program that builds marine sculptures. It epitomizes the next generation in science studies—engineers test the structures for stress that students and artists will eventually build. It is a lesson for students on compression and tension. For the Chinese New Year, we worked with Asian students to research, write, act out and experience a variety of local historical narratives. Students from Tacoma’s School of the Arts critiqued the acting, a Native American performed, and flashlights and music from iPads helped to set the scenes for attending community members.

We are interested in bringing in the cultural aspects of those who lived on the waterfront and what they contributed to Tacoma. Beyond the history, today’s students need to understand what is going down our storm drains so that we do not re-pollute the bay. For example, we challenge students to produce solutions to a difficult problem: purchase ingredients for and make a recipe for a meal without using plastics. They discover that they simply cannot do it. It is most gratifying to watch students examine, evaluate, express, and then do. It is hands-on, experiential learning without lectures.

Q: What has most surprised you in these efforts?

A: The generosity of volunteers, supporters, and the willingness of skilled community members--university faculty and engineers--to share their expertise. There are networked educators in environmental science who care or who perhaps have learned a new concept and wish to share it.

Q: What changes have you observed?

A: The general mindset has shifted in people’s daily practices. You don’t see the slew of personal care items in plastic containers on the shelves of Fred Meyer that you did not so long ago. Since being named a Superfund cleanup site, there is much more awareness about what goes into the waters of Commencement Bay, and more people at the beach. More people engage with the water and are aware of their personal impact on it.