

At All Hands Boatworks, mentors connect with kids through boatbuilding



Amy Schwabe

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On a Monday afternoon in early February, the woodworking shop for All Hands Boatworks on the south side of Milwaukee was humming with activity. A group of people cut a large sheet of wood on a table saw, while nearby, others sanded parts of chairs. Many people were engaged in various stages of boatbuilding.

The woodworkers were mostly teenage middle and high school students, some of whom had signed up for an out-of-the-ordinary after-school activity, while others were exploring carpentry as a possible career path. Each group of kids had at least one enthusiastic adult mentor helping them out.

Ed Koscik was one of them.

Koscik has been teaching, mentoring and helping kids in southeast Wisconsin since he started his first teaching job in Milwaukee in 1966.



Koscik also has a lifelong interest in carpentry. As director of a summer camp in the 1970s, he helped kids build canoes. He's built a number of his own boats over the years. And, after purchasing 10 acres of property decades ago, he even built his own house.

He retired for the first time when he was in his 60s, then decided to go back to teaching for a few years in Hustisford. After retiring once again — realizing teaching "is not a game for old guys" — Koscik discovered a new volunteer opportunity that perfectly melds his interests in teaching and building things. For the past several years, Koscik, now 82, has been working with [All Hands Boatworks](#), teaching kids how to build boats.

Helping kids conquer fear of failure

Bill Nimke, executive director and founder of All Hands, also started out as a teacher. After teaching for several years and leading his own charter school for awhile, he decided he wanted to start a youth program that would focus on hands-on skills and mentorship.

After researching youth organizations around the country that had success with motivating and encouraging kids, he came across successful groups that built their mentorship programs around boatbuilding. The programs he found were on the coasts, but, "since we have a great river system and lakefront right here, it makes sense to have a group in Milwaukee."

He contacted a few teachers and administrators he knew in Milwaukee's schools and got to work.

"I started out with hand tools and plywood in the trunk of my car," Nimke said. "I would bring lumber and tools to schools and we would build the boats right there at their schools."

The group has been in their current space — a workshop at 621 S. 12th St. — for the past four years, their reach has grown to more than 50 schools and organizations, and they have led more than 145 projects with more than 6,000 middle and high school kids.

Nimke said there's not a simple, one-sentence answer to the question, "Why boats?"

"Boat-building is an endlessly educational project from the math that's used in construction to things like growth in confidence, pride of accomplishment and an improvement in teamwork and other cooperative skills," Nimke said.

He also noted that mentorship through carpentry is effective at helping kids conquer a fear of failure.

"Kids have this fear of messing up, but they often have this 'aha' moment with us," Nimke said. "We learn from making mistakes, and wood is a forgiving material. There's nothing we do that we can't correct."

Carter Lawson, who interned with All Hands after graduating from high school last year, said that's a lesson he's learned through the group's programs.

"I grew up around carpentry, and my family even built our house," Lawson said. "Back then, people were always telling me what to do. But now, when I'm given a task, I can figure out how to do it. There are lower stakes here so I can learn from my mistakes. There's always a way to fix a mistake."

Who made the cubby with the fancy handle?

All Hands program offerings have grown to include school woodworking classes, a series of summer day camps and tool sharpening and cutting-board building classes for adults. A key initiative is RAFT, an after-school program where kids come to the shop two nights a week for eight weeks to



learn carpentry skills, hang out together and, of course, build boats.

At a recent RAFT session, about 15 middle and high school students trickled into the building a little before 4 p.m. They headed to a lounge area with tables, tables, chairs and storage cubbies set up for each of them. They chatted with each other, scrolled through their phones, did homework and worked on art as they waited for the first part of the session — pizza.

"We want the kids to feel safe, welcome and supported so we always have something to eat when they come in," Nimke said, laughing. "We also have a small grant from [Bader Philanthropies](#) because our plan is to renovate this space to have more of a feel of a teen lounge."

Koscik, after finishing preparations for his oar-building session, made his way to the lounge to grab his own pizza and talk to the kids.

Koscik pulled a hand-made cubby out of a stack of shelves on the wall. One of the first woodworking projects the RAFT kids did was building an individual storage cubby from a set of directions. Because each shelf was a slightly different size, students had to make sure they were measuring their cuts properly in order to fit the space.

One cubby — beautifully decorated and with an ornate handle affixed to it — stood out to Koscik since it seemed a bit too tight to easily pull out of its space.

Koscik turned around to see Jacob Kent grinning at him. Koscik grinned back, verified it was Kent's cubby and asked him what happened.

"It's a really funny story," Kent said. "I actually measured it wrong at first."

"Oh, yeah, and this panel is actually supposed to be on the other side too," Koscik answered.

"Yeah, but I thought it looked cooler the way I made it."

"I agree with you, and your artwork is wonderful," Koscik encouraged.

"Yeah, plus, see? I added a handle," Kent responded.

"Yeah, you need one!" Koscik replied, and the two laughed together.

As Koscik left to grab some pizza, Kent — a high school senior who has attended All Hands programs for the past three years — admitted he tends to "rush through some of the starting projects" to get to what he really loves — building boats.

"I've always been interested in the marine industry and I've taken woodworking in high school," Kent said. "Next year, I'm going to attend Great Lakes Boatbuilding School" (in Michigan).



'Measure twice, cut once'

After pizza, Patrick McBriarty, the director of special projects at All Hands, started the session with a few announcements. The 15 kids were split up into five different groups, each with a mentor leading them and with a few more mentors rotating around the group as well.

One group removed copper wires that held temporarily held a boat until the glue dried. Another worked on their cubbies. A third group was learning to build chairs for the teen lounge.

Koscik's group of kids worked on building their own oars. He told them that even if they didn't use their oars for boat-steering, they could paint them to use as decor in their rooms.

Koscik — who says there are numerous skills and academic disciplines covered by woodworking — started the kids out with a discussion that encompassed biology, math and physics. He showed them what lumber looks like before the tree bark is removed, he pointed out the need to design the oar in a manner which takes water pressure into consideration and he reiterated a point he would make often to the group during their time together — to "measure twice and cut once."

"Everyone gather around over here," Koscik told his three students as he carried a piece of lumber to a table saw. "Remember, we figured out what the measurement on this cut needed to be. So I want all of you to measure and tell me what you get."

Each student took a turn measuring.

"OK, do we all agree on the measurement?" Koscik asked.

He gave them a moment and then commented, "This one over here, that doesn't look the same as the one over here."

Koscik gave the kids a quick grin, and as they grinned back before getting the wood into place to cut, he reminded them, "Measure twice, cut once," as they all started laughing.

As one of the students, 14-year-old Eva Hubbart, waited her turn on the table saw, she said she first got interested in woodworking as a young child when her mom took her to a kids' woodworking class at Home Depot.

"That was the most fun thing ever," Hubbart said. "And then I came here with [Doors Open Milwaukee](#) with my mom last year, and I said, 'Mom, I can do this too.'"

Hubbart did her first RAFT session last October and is now in her second session.

"Woodworking is absolutely one of the things I want to do as a career," Hubbart said.

'The kids' eyes light up

Nimke — who views the All Hands shop as a community space — said program offerings have grown and diversified as interest has grown. They include a class on boat-building for women, a Saturday woodworking program for young kids and adults and, most recently, apprenticeships, internships and job readiness training programs for older kids.



While many of those career opportunities focus on carpentry, All Hands has also expanded to teach kids about water recreation and maritime careers.

"Through our connections with people in water recreation, we've learned there are quite a few seasonal jobs and career paths in the maritime industry in Milwaukee," Nimke said. "A lot of people have no idea they exist."

McBriarty said that's one reason the organization started a 15-week introduction to the maritime industry class.

"The kids learn survival skills and get their boating license," he said. "Then we also have them visit the Port of Milwaukee and the Coast Guard, then get them on the Milwaukee Fire Boat, and they also learn skills on our own boats as well."

As interest in All Hands' programs grows, so does the need for volunteers. McBriarty said the group currently has close to 20 active volunteers, some of whom work in the shop behind the scenes and some of whom are instructors like Koscik.

"We've got all kinds of wonderful saws and drill presses and routers and hand tools, and it's always amazing to me to see the kids get a big kick out of learning to use them," Koscik said. "It can be frustrating working with kids, and sometimes you just want them to listen, but I understand, I was a kid once, and I made the same mistakes, and it's fine for them to make them too."

"If you look at the kids' eyes light up when they understand something and their smiles, it lights me up too. I can't tell you the joy I have working with these kids."

