Tacoma program helps troubled youths build more than boats

BY ADAM LYNN, Staff writer, LIU KIT WONG, Staff Photographer

“Being on a boat that’s moving through water, it’s so clear. Everything falls into place in terms of what’s important and what’s not.”
— James Taylor, singer-songwriter

Meet Kyle. He’s 16 and from Fife. He’s got the long, lean look of a basketball forward and the buzz cut of an Army private. His handshake is strong. His diction clear. His record, alas, is muddy. He got caught doing something wrong and ended up with a juvenile criminal record.

In that strange way life sometimes works, a turn through the juvenile justice system turned out to be a bit of a blessing for Kyle, who got referred to the Tacoma Community Boat Builders program as part of his probation. To say the program saved his life would be hyperbole, but it certainly showed him a path he otherwise might not have taken.

That path includes the smell of sawdust, the screech of a circular saw, the comfort of fellowship, the satisfaction of hard work and that beautiful feeling of being at the oars of a floating boat and commanding, if only for a sunny summer afternoon, your own destiny. “You feel more free out there,” he said of his time on the water. Standing next to him, Paul Birkey, 66, smiles the smile of a man seeing his dream come to fruition.

Tacoma Community Boat Builders is Birkey’s brainchild and baby. A Wyoming native, Birkey moved to Washington four decades ago and “became a boat builder somehow.” He’s now president and founder of Belina Interiors, which has earned an international reputation for outfitting luxury yachts.

A few years back, he began sniffing around for a project that would allow him to give something back to the town he loves.

“Tacoma’s of a scale that it still feels like a community,” he said as he showed a visitor around the Tacoma Community Boat Builders facility on the Thea Foss Waterway last week. “I love that about it.”
Birkey had heard of other programs across the country that paired at-risk kids with master craftsmen and craftswomen.

Birkey knew a lot of people skilled in the trades. He knew Tacoma had a population of at-risk kids. He knew people he thought could help him bring the two together, including now retired Superior Court Judge Tom Larkin. “I was just thinking maybe we could leverage all this into something,” Birkey said. And so, with the help of his friend John Richards and others, he did.

The program kicked off in May 2014, at first bringing kids like Kyle down to the boat shop once a week to learn how to build a boat, and, on occasion, sail or row one. The kids range in age from 13 to 18 and are either on juvenile court probation or in the court’s diversion program.

Birkey said he soon discovered the kids and the volunteers, even himself, were building something bigger than boats: camaraderie, responsibility, friendship, “all kinds of positive things.” The first sessions of the program were so successful, Birkey and executive director Shannon Shea decided to expand it to two days a week.

Nearly 60 kids have gone through the program since then, and Birkey and Shea would like to expand it to even more, including maybe opening it up to families whose kids haven’t been in trouble with the law. “We’re trying to get upstream of the problems if we can,” Shea said.

Money, of course, is an issue. The program’s annual budget of less than $100,000 is funded by private donations, grants and corporate gifts. Birkey pointed out that it costs about $21 an hour to put a kid through the 10-week program. “You can’t send a kid to counseling for that,” he said.

As a Pierce County juvenile probation officer, Tim Westman knows the costs of young lives wasted by bad choices. Westman also knows the power of one-on-one relationships, especially between a caring man and an impressionable boy who might not have a positive male role model in his life.

The beauty of Tacoma Community Boat Builders, the thing that really makes it work, is that each kid is assigned to work with a sole adult, Westman said. They form a team that works together, talks together, builds trust together. “That’s worked wonderfully,” he said. “We realized that when we can do a one-on-one, give them a mentor, it was like night and day. The kids engage more.”

The volunteers assembled by Birkey include retire mental-health professionals, master marine craftsmen, a former technical college instructor, a retired Marine and a logistics specialist at Amazon.

On a recent Thursday, they paired up with their protégés and dove into the work. Some operated sawdust-spewing table saws. Others climbed aboard the hulls of overturned dories to replace planks. Some grabbed chisels and sandpaper to remove the fading paint from a 1941 Penguin sailboat. There was little chatter, aside from the occasional suggestion from a volunteer or a quiet question from a boy.
The boat shop is run like a business. The kids are expected to show up on time, be ready to work, be respectful to their peers and the volunteers and to clean up their tools and shop at the end of their three-hour shift. Oh, and no cussing.

The idea, Westman said, is for the boys to learn skills they can transfer to the workforce someday, not just how to operate power tools, but how to be responsible, how to function as a team, how to solve problems, how to be punctual. “The work is a teacher in and of itself,” Westman said. There are other lessons he hopes the boys learn. “We want them to see they’re not only building something, but building something they’re going to use, to get on, to be out in nature with,” Westman said. “Coaching boys into men is kind of theme.”

The men get something out of it, too, aside from the access to power tools. “It’s the best part of my week, being here to see these kids grow and achieve something,” said Westman, who is often at the boat shop on Thursdays to supervise and help out on projects. “It’s been great.”

Volunteers Ammon Schwanger and Reid Morrow agree. Schwanger is a former teacher who now works in the construction trade. He said the team at Tacoma Community Boat Builders has become another family for him. “We eat together. We work together. We play together,” Schwanger said. “If that’s not family, I don’t know what is.”

Morrow is a former member of the U.S. Navy who moved to the Puget Sound area upon discharge. His skills in logistics were highly prized by Amazon, where he now works. Morrow demanded a few concessions before taking the Amazon job. One was Thursdays off so he could fulfill his volunteer commitment to Tacoma Community Boat Builders. “It was absolutely a condition of employment,” said Morrow, sawdust coating his T-shirt, his safety goggles smudged with sweat, a smile on his face.

Tacoma Community Boat Builders is Shea’s full-time job. There’s a certain incongruity to that, she said. A seasoned advocate for child welfare who’s worked with at-risk kids in Mexico and Africa, she knows much about achieving positive outcomes, the power of one-on-one mentoring and the importance of structure in a young person’s life.

What she doesn’t know anything about is boats. “That’s the funny thing about where I am,” she said.

Still, Birkey saw in her the skills and passion he wanted for the professional leader of Tacoma Community Boat Builders and hired her as the nonprofit program’s one paid employee. Shea saw a chance to help kids who need it and likes the fact they get one-on-one attention. “They get 100 percent of their mentors’ time from the minute they walk in the door,” she said.
Now that the program has been proven to work, the goal is to expand it, Shea said. She and Birkey would like to have Tacoma Community Boat Builders grow into a five-day-a-week concern. That would cost about $250,000 a year. “We’ve got some work to do,” Shea said.

Sixteen-year-old Kyle, it’s clear, was eager to get back to work. A graduate of Tacoma Community Boat Builder’s summer session, he received special permission to come back and work at the boat shop this fall, and the whine of the band saw was calling.

“One of the things I like about it is you never run out of something to do,” Kyle said. “There’s always another job for you.”

Now it was his mentor Peter Hales’ turn to smile. Hales retired from Belina Interiors and now volunteers at Tacoma Community Boat Builders. “When these kids first get in a boat, it’s a challenge for them,” Hales said. “But at the end of the last session, these kids were in those boats rowing in a straight line. It really was great to see.”

It was, in its way, an illustration of what’s important, and what’s not.

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**TACOMA COMMUNITY BOAT BUILDERS**

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