

# Sailing helps keep kids out of trouble

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Published August 27, 2006

Sailing means different things to different people. For some at-risk youth, it's helping set a course toward a better life.

A nonprofit a corporation called Youth Educational Support Services (YESS), has been using sailboats and sailing instruction for years to keep young people out of gangs, away from drugs, alcohol and criminal behavior and in school. Its first program, called Outpost 001, continues to focus on sailing as well as camping and other outdoor activities.

YESS itself is a descendant of Bridgeport Communities in Schools. That organization was founded in 1989 by Dr. Huey Barnett as a community-based program to keep young people in school.

Barnett began that phase of his life after a 23-year career in nuclear medicine. The program serves more than 3,000 young people and their families in the Clear Creek and Dickinson school districts.

Barnett said he founded YESS in 1998 because he has 13 grandchildren, because he was concerned with the growth of gang activity and because he loves the outdoors. The initial focus on marine-related activities was no accident. Gene Schwantes, former owner of a sailboat charter company called Windward SeaVenture at Waterford Harbor on the south shore of Clear Lake, helped Barnett organize YESS during its early days.

"We started teaching kids to sail. It just grew from there," Schwantes said.

"So many of the kids have never even been on a boat," Schwantes said. In Outpost 001, "We teach them navigation and sailing — the discipline of sailing is important." He said that getting the young people out with nature — and under sail — helps them understand how Galveston Bay contributes to the disciplines of life.

“That’s where we ring the bell with kids,” Schwantes said. “These kids come away awe-struck. They want to know what comes next.”

YESS has grown to include a second program, called BaySmart, now in its fifth year. It goes beyond just sailing. It shows young people many of the bay’s elements, including its natural setting, nature, geography and economy. In cooperation with their teachers, BaySmart gives pre-teens an awareness of how knowledge from the classroom relates to reality.

One BaySmart goal is to build a \$350,000 shallow-draft pontoon power boat, capable of carrying 100 people into various areas of the bay, including its marshlands. As envisioned, it would be a floating classroom/laboratory and observation platform. It is seeking donations for the boat, to help them expand their introductory water tour.

YESS already gets financial support from the Texas Parks and Wildlife, the Port of Houston and from some marine-related businesses. The group now does the tour on a smaller and less capable boat.

The BaySmart tour is designed to show the young people “just what Galveston Bay means, in its entirety,” said Schwantes, who is chairman of the YESS Senior Advisory Board. The 10- to 12-year-olds are exposed to what the bay means — environmentally, economically and recreationally.

Today the focus of YESS remains on youth in the pre and early teens. They are, Schwantes said, at an age where they can go two ways, bad or good. “Getting them exposed to opportunities makes a huge difference to some of these kids.” Discipline is another vital element. “Discipline is part of sailing,” Schwantes said. Sailing remains a part of the YESS mix.

Young people participate in the programs without charge. They come mostly from Harris County. Plans are afoot to offer YESS services to youngsters throughout the greater Galveston bay areas.

John Ira Petty, a sailing instructor, licensed captain and charter sailboat owner, is the sailing columnist for the Daily News.