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Boat builders enjoy the fruits of their labor

By BRIDGET SMITH
Courier-Post Staff

Five Camden teens saw more than a month of hard work set sail on the Cooper River Saturday morning.

Three newly built wooden rowboats were launched into the river near the Cooper River Yacht Club, capping a six-week project for the boys, all members of Urban Promise Ministries, a faith-based organization in the city.

"Faith," "Hope" and "Promise" were the three 12-foot-long vessels built by the teens, who all work in the organization's Urban Trekkers program.

Surrounded by friends and family on a sunny summer morning, four of the teens -- Richard Gaines Jr., Hassan Jackson, Isaiah Morgan and Clarence Porter -- loaded their boats into the water, climbed in, and successfully pushed off the dock near the Yacht Club. A fifth teen, Shakeem Cook, could not attend the celebration.

After some initial hesitation while they got the feel for rowing, the teens settled in quickly and spent nearly two hours on the water, giving rides to parents, friends, photographers -- whoever wanted to jump in.

Gaines, 16, said it was "incredibly rewarding" to see the boats take shape and, ultimately, do what they were designed to do.

He worked on two of the vessels, and said it took a lot of manual labor, including cutting, measuring and sanding.

"Our motto was, measure twice, and cut once," he said. "It was crazy."

And while he said it was sometimes difficult to want to spend hours working on the boats -- especially on days when the teens were busy helping to run Urban Promise's summer camps -- the end result made it more than worthwhile.

"They look way better than I thought they would," he said.

"I feel like I've accomplished something in my life."

Elaine Hawkins, 41, laughed as her son, 14-year-old Clarence Porter, took her out for a quick spin in the boat he helped build.

"I think it's pretty awesome that he got to do this," she said. "He'd never done anything like this before."

The boat-building project began about a month and a half ago, said Jim Cummings, director of Urban Trekkers. The teens met 10 times a week.

Cummings said it was an opportunity for the boys to work together, stay busy, and apply some of the things they've learned in school through the years.

"One of these guys gave me the best quote," Cummings said. "He said, "I guess this is why we need to know math."

Each vessel started as four pieces of plywood that were measured, cut down and eventually "sewn" together using nylon ties. A coat of a special glue was applied, and the nylon ties were eventually removed. The boys painted each vessel and chose names for them.

The red boat is "Promise," named for the organization. "Faith" and "Hope" are blue and green, respectively, named for programs within Urban Promise's youth summer camps.

Cummings has already sold "Promise" for about \$2,500. He hopes to auction off the other two and use the funds for a similar project during the next school year.

Cummings said he hoped the boat-building experience would help the teens build character and confidence, as well.

"They could've built anything this summer, but there's just something cool about having these kids build boats," he said. "There's symbolism with a boat. It can take you to places you've never been before."

Reach Bridget Smith at (856) 486-2473 or brksmith@camden.gannett.com
