

WASHINGTONIANS OF THE YEAR 2005

For 34 years, *The Washingtonian* has honored those who make the region a better place for all of us. This year's winners prove once again that good people can and do make a difference. By Leslie Milk and Ellen Ryan.

Photographs by GARY LANDSMAN

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JOE YOUCHA

"We use the river, boats, and boat building to teach kids, get them jobs, get them back on track."

GO DOWN TO JOE YOUCHA'S WORKSHOP ON THE POTOMAC AND you'll see young men learning to build wooden boats. What you won't see is that Youcha is building futures.

He has an agreement with the International Brotherhood of Carpenters and Joiners: The union will take every kid he recommends into its apprenticeship program.

But first the young men have to complete Youcha's program at the Alexandria Seaport Foundation. That includes hands-on training in boat building, academics so the kids can get their GEDs, drug counseling if needed, and a lot of attitude adjustment.

Many of Youcha's apprentices have been in trouble. "We socialize these kids," he says. "We give them something better to do, get them ready to go into real jobs."

To be accepted by the union, an apprentice needs a diploma or GED, driver's license, car, and his own tools. Youcha has a deal with Don Beyer to help buy used cars for the kids in his program. He'll arrange driver's ed. He'll get donated tools or donations to buy them. Volunteers and staff work with kids every step of the way. "Whatever it takes," Youcha says.

Growing up near New York's Hudson River, Joe Youcha helped his father build a wooden boat when he was five. The craft is still a labor of love—one he shares with families interested in boat building. But his true mission is the apprentice program.

The first time boys come into the shop, they say, "We can't do that," he says.

A week or two later, it's "we can do it, but it's not going to float."

A month or two after that, it's "we can launch it, but I'm not getting in it."

But when they finally do get out on the water, they discover a new world. Youcha remembers Quincy, a teen in the first group, who had to be coaxed into the boat he helped build.

Sailing on the Potomac at sunset, Quincy said, "It's beautiful out here. How come everybody's not out here?"