



Rowing Program Helps Teenage Girls Get Fit and Build Confidence (San Francisco Bay Area)

"When you're on the water, you have to have a one-track mind," said Caitlin. "I never had that before. My brain was like everywhere."

Initially, Caitlin was not interested in rowing. "My mom signed me up against my wishes. I thought it would be boring." Instead, she found rowing to be physically and mentally challenging. "You have to do a lot of things outside rowing, like push-ups and running. You've got to concentrate and keep up with the other girls. Rowing has showed me how to keep my focus."

Caitlin is one of about 25 girls from Oakland's five public high schools who participate in the nine-month rowing program through a Team-Up for Youth grant. That grant enables the Jack London Aquatic Center to offer the program for \$270, rather than the usual \$1,500. If the reduced fee is too expensive, it can be waived.

"Rowing gives the kids a chance to be different, to be good at something that their parents don't know about, something that their brother or sister doesn't play," says Peggy Johnston, program director and a volunteer coach. Johnston crewed for the U.S. national rowing team for 10 years and won the Master's World Championship in 2006.

Rowing is the first sport in which many of these girls have participated. In addition to exercise, it teaches them how to work as a team. "Physically, rowing is one of the best all-around sports," says Johnston. "Rowing builds confidence."

The girls train four afternoons a week, from September to May. After the program started in 2004, staff discovered that many of the girls did not know how to swim, and so they added twice-weekly swimming lessons for the first eight weeks.

In the fall, the girls learn rowing technique and build an aerobic base on indoor rowing machines. Then, they move onto the Oakland estuary. "The girls love being on the water. It takes them away from everything," says Johnston. The team competes against other local and California rowing teams, including in an annual three-day race in Sacramento, Calif.



The aquatic center has two vans, donated by AC Transit, a public transportation authority in the region, to transport the girls from school. The University of California, Berkeley, and the Lake Merritt Rowing Club donate the equipment used in the program.

Johnston is especially proud that nearly all of the girls go on to college after completing the rowing program. One rower, Joya Rogers, received a scholarship to the University of California, Berkeley. She is on the university's National College Athletic Association division crew team.