

# Richmond Times-Dispatch

Breaking down barriers

## Latino students find new frontier on James River



DANIEL SANGJIB MIN/RTD

A student holds a small crab as part of a lesson on the James River ecosystem. The students also learned about pollutants and tributaries of the Chesapeake Bay.

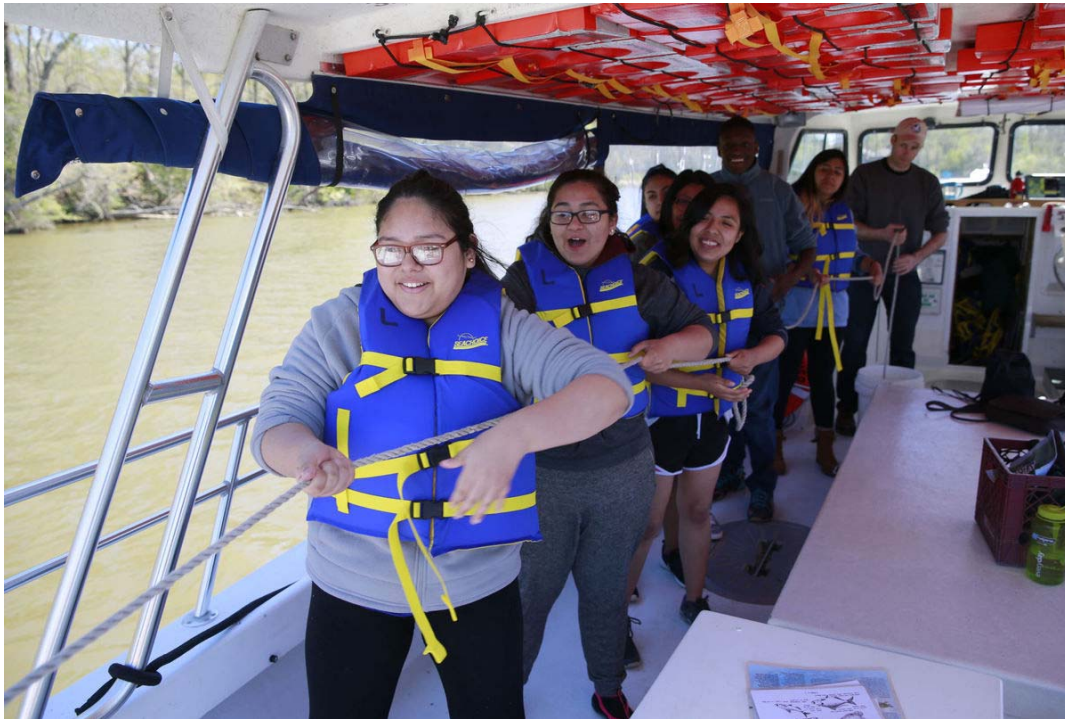
Maricela Lopez gripped the deck of the small boat with white knuckles, the waves of the James River lapping just below her.

Somehow, her wires had gotten crossed.

The high school sophomore thought her Saturday morning would be spent planting grass with the Chesapeake Bay Foundation and the Sacred Heart Center.

She didn't realize she would end up on a boat — for the first time in her life. As the boat picked up speed and cut parallel to the Benjamin Harrison Memorial Bridge, Eric Wiegandt with the Chesapeake Bay Foundation told the group of seven students from Henrico County that they were free to grab some binoculars, walk around the deck and check out nearby osprey nests.

Lopez didn't budge, only shifting slightly in her bulky life jacket. She wasn't alone. For four of the seven students, it was their first time on a boat.



DANIEL SANGJIB MIN/RTD

Jessica Ixcot-Hernandez (left), Roxanna Bedoya, Jazmin Lopez and others pull in a net to catch fish and crabs from the James River. The Chesapeake Bay Foundation partnered with the Sacred Heart Center to give the Latino high school students within the center's College and Career Bound program a feel of the river. The program also helps them navigate scholarship opportunities, among other things.

It was also the first time that the Chesapeake Bay Foundation partnered with the Sacred Heart Center to give the Latino high school students within the center's College and Career Bound program a feel of the river.

Lopez, a sophomore at Highland Springs High School in Henrico, wants to become a pediatric nurse. Like most of the students on the boat Saturday, the aspiring Virginia Commonwealth University student would be the first person in her family to attend college.

The Sacred Heart Center's college program had helped her and her family navigate the jungle of scholarship options and financial aid packages and had allowed her to visit some campuses, among other things.

She never realized it would end up taking her on the James River.

“It’s a general effort to work with communities that we haven’t worked with in the past,” said Wiegandt, an environmental educator with the bay foundation. “So we are working with more minority communities.”

The hope, Kenny Fletcher with the foundation added, is that the community outreach will help break down barriers.



DANIEL SANGJIB MIN/RTD

Jazmin Lopez (left) and Maria Del Pilar Gonzalez look for wild birds. Educators with the Chesapeake Bay Foundation are trying to reach out to communities the group hasn’t worked with in the past, including Latino high school students.

To jostle them out of their silence, Wiegandt peppered the students with questions about the Chesapeake Bay and its tributaries. He pulled out maps detailing the source of pollutants and the health of the water.

Slowly, there was some movement. Within an hour, all hands were on deck as Wiegandt charged the teenagers with helping him pull in a net full of a variety of life living beneath the surface.

“Now pull, you scurvy mateys!” he yelled.

Jazmin Lopez, 17, paused from pulling the rope to laugh. Within minutes, she was petting a small blue crab she named Jimmy.

She must soon choose between the University of Virginia and Virginia Tech. She is the only one of her siblings who will attend a four-year college.

The Highland Springs senior was already active in environmental causes, and knew many of the answers to questions Wiegandt asked Saturday. But she didn't realize such a variety of species — like Jimmy — would arrive in the net.

Neither did Maricela Lopez.

"I had no idea there were crabs in the river," she said.

By the time the boat cut its way back to Jordan Point Road in Hopewell, she stood on the deck, watching the waves again. She likes boats, she decided, especially when they go fast.

By VANESSA REMMERS Richmond Times-Dispatch

Apr 8, 2017