

**River clean-up  
and a new mission  
to attract diversity  
have won Pittsburgh  
rowing national  
acclaim. But  
opening boat seats  
to new faces is  
proving easier than  
filling them.**

*By Thomas Buell, Jr.  
Photography by Steve Mellon*

It's an early spring morning, along the last few miles of the Allegheny River above Pittsburgh's Point. A glorious rising sun illuminates a scattered fleet of sleek racing shells as they sweep up one side of the river and down the other. Soon they return to the side channel of Washington's Landing—the hummock of land once known as Herr's Island—and the boathouses of Three Rivers Rowing Association.

Coming off the river is a thin slice of the city—high schoolers, college students and adults ranging from the young and eager to the gray and plodding. They carry their boats and oars into storage, then drive, bike or jog away, folding into morning routines as work-a-day Pittsburgh settles into its first cup of coffee. Come late afternoon, the scene will repeat itself each summer day. And the cycle continues deep into autumn.

The rowers are asked what brings them together, and many talk about their attraction to the water and the personal joy they experience in the challenges and rewards of human-powered boating.

"I just love being out there on the river," says Christal Adams, a graduating high school senior who practices afternoons with a crew representing several city high schools. "It was a little hard at first, but now I'm used to it."

While some passers-by may catch a glimpse of the boats gliding past, this daily

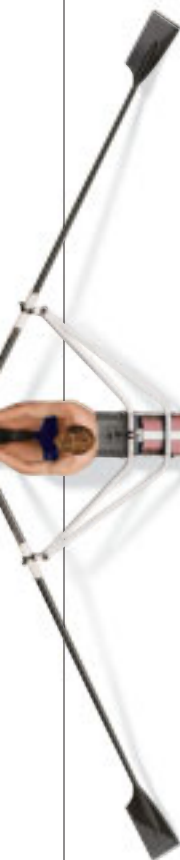
ROW

**“Yes, [rowing] helped me to work with people a lot more. It helped me to be a leader, and it helped with my communication skills.... It’s made a big difference.”**

Westinghouse High School graduate  
Christal Adams, recipient of an academic–rowing  
scholarship to Duquesne University



# ING FOR LIFE



ritual has gone largely unnoticed by many in the city. But that is rapidly changing. The clean-up of Pittsburgh's rivers and the construction of new paths and waterfront parks have coincided with a steady resurgence in rowing's popularity in Allegheny County, which was a hotbed of the sport in the late 1800s when more than 20 rowing clubs dotted the riverbanks and rowing was *the* professional sport in town.

Pittsburgh also is in the forefront of a shift in rowing demographics. Led by The Heinz Endowments, Three Rivers Rowing has actively sought to break down the image of the sport as a pastime reserved for the sons of the wealthy white.

Adams—African American and college bound—is one of the success stories coming out of a change process more difficult than rowing organizers and foundation officials had imagined. But the club has been unrelenting in pursuing its mission to improve access to the rivers for everyone in the region. As a result, Three Rivers Rowing has grown into one of the largest and most respected community rowing organizations in the country.

Formed in 1984 by a handful of rowing enthusiasts who stored their battered shells in a trailer and launched from a muddy riverbank, Three Rivers now reports 275 members, with about 1,500 more using club facilities each year.

From its state-of-the-art facilities, Three Rivers hosts 14 high school crews and four college rowing programs, a masters program

for adults, and adaptive programs for blind, hearing-impaired and physically challenged rowers. The club hosts five regattas each year, including the nationally prominent Head of the Ohio race each October, as well as kayak and dragon boat races.

With funding from the Endowments, the Richard King Mellon and Scaife Foundations, and other philanthropic and corporate supporters, Three Rivers has expanded several times in its original location on reclaimed industrial land at Washington's Landing, and most recently with a second location in the new Millvale Riverfront Park.

Opened last November, the new \$2 million facility includes a 15,000-square-foot training center featuring two rowing tanks for year-round practice, exercise rooms, locker rooms, meeting spaces and offices. It was built to strict environmental standards for construction, heating, cooling and recycling that align with the Endowments' goals for making the Pittsburgh area a cleaner place to live. That same vision led to additional funding for a new program called the "Tireless Project," which combines an effort to collect discarded tires and other debris from the riverbanks with environmental education programs for students and leaders of riverside communities.

Three Rivers Rowing has gained national prominence not only for developing top-notch rowers—crews from each of the club's major programs have won gold medals in national championships in the past few years—but also as a leader in the community rowing movement.





# R

“Clearly, Three Rivers Rowing is performing a valuable role that goes beyond putting oars in people’s hands,” says former board member Court Gould, director of Sustainable Pittsburgh, a community organization advocating policies that combine economic prosperity with social equity and environmental quality.

“It’s contributing in a material way to community development, economic development, improving the image of Pittsburgh, retaining talent, access to the waterways, environmental stewardship, all of that,” says Gould.

In fact, environmental stewardship was one of the reasons why USRowing, the national governing body of American rowing, presented last year’s Club of the Year award to Three Rivers. The club bested 750 other rowing organizations on other factors ranging from competitive achievements to community service.

But what put the Pittsburgh club ahead of others was its commitment to eliminate rowing’s long-standing reputation as an elitist sport. Why would the foundation community invest in an area that might seem to be off the radar of most mainstream Pittsburghers? “We’re investing in this precisely because it is foreign to so many,” says Caren Glotfelty, director of the Endowments’ Environment Program. “We want to support any effort that brings people closer to area waterways and puts them in a position that makes them care.” Other sports offer benefits similar to those from rowing, she says, but rowing delivers them at a higher level. “It’s important to open those to as many Pittsburghers as possible,” she says.

To Mike Lambert, the club’s executive director and a founding member, achieving that demands more than posting an “all persons welcome” policy.

“It’s one thing to have an open door, but it’s another thing to be assertive—to go out and bring people in,” he said. “That’s always what we try to do. We have to go out and invite them in.”

Christal Adams, recruited from Westinghouse High School and now a Three Rivers ambassador in Pittsburgh’s African-American and youth circles, is the dream candidate Three Rivers officials envisioned when they began to focus on diversity. She joined the All-City Crew—the group made up of a dozen and a half rowers from Westinghouse, Schenley and Peabody high schools—and recently won a combined academic and rowing scholarship to Duquesne University. For Adams, rowing has taught lessons with benefits far beyond the banks of the river.

“Yes, it helped me to work with people a lot more,” says Adams, who was her class valedictorian. “It helped me to be a leader, and it helped with my communications skills. I guess it’s made a big difference.”

As inspiring as her story may be, Adams is still part of a tiny minority at Three Rivers, which continues to struggle to attract and retain women, African Americans and other minorities in the club.

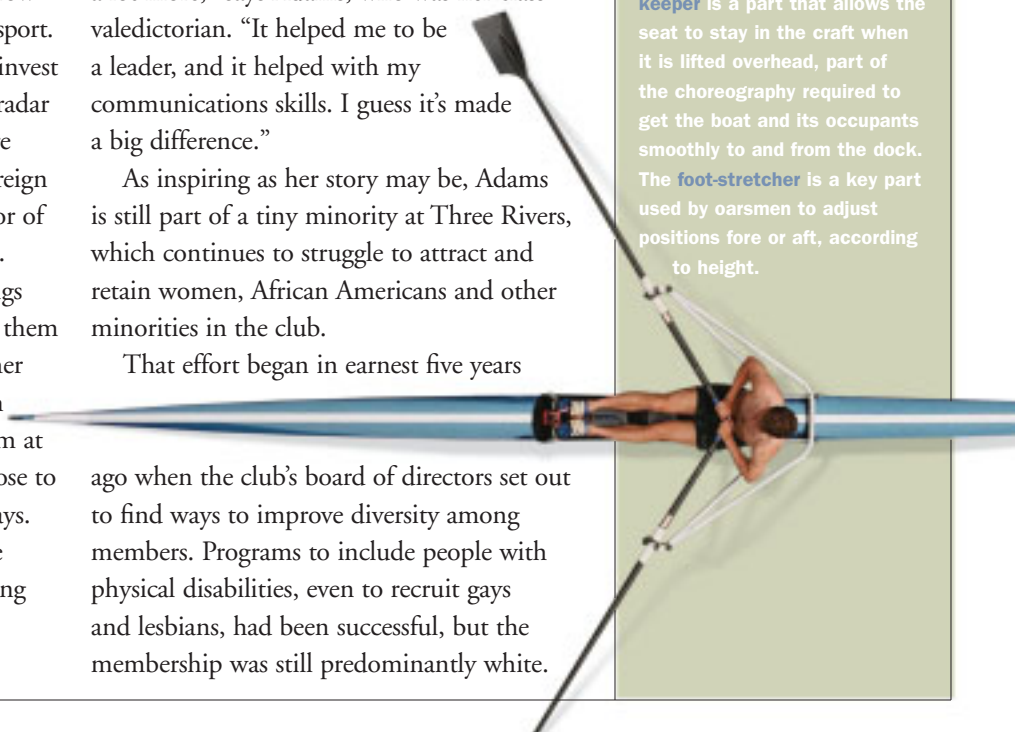
That effort began in earnest five years

ago when the club’s board of directors set out to find ways to improve diversity among members. Programs to include people with physical disabilities, even to recruit gays and lesbians, had been successful, but the membership was still predominantly white.

rowers have two basic boat choices for catching their river Zen. They can do the group thing in a four- or eight-person boat, known as a **shell**. Or, they can re-connect with their inner selves by going solo in a **scull**.

The front of the shell or scull is the **bow**. For optimum efficiency, the rower sits facing the **stern**, or the back of the craft. Many rowers use head gear with a side mirror to see objects ahead. As the rower sits backward in the craft, the side to the left is **starboard**; to the right is **port**. **Fore** is any reference to the front of the craft; **aft**, the rear.

The **rigger** is the metal structure protruding from the boat that gives the oars support. The **oarlock**, the metal and plastic part connected to the rigger, holds an oar. A **seat keeper** is a part that allows the seat to stay in the craft when it is lifted overhead, part of the choreography required to get the boat and its occupants smoothly to and from the dock. The **foot-stretcher** is a key part used by oarsmen to adjust positions fore or aft, according to height.



**“It was really tough at first, because they’d never been exposed to rowing. Finally, I began to develop relationships with people who helped me get in the doors.”**

Three Rivers Community Programs Director Robert Chambers III, on the barriers he faced in recruiting from the African-American community





**“At least we didn’t finish dead last, which was really significant for a crew full of guys who hadn’t stepped into a boat of any kind [before joining the crew].”**

Corporate Crew Coach Carol Wharton, whose land job is teaching fifth grade





**“We just need to keep finding ways to expose more of our students to [rowing]. They love it.... It’s a slow process, but it’s going to happen. I know it.”**

Westinghouse High School Principal  
Marilyn Barnett



# R

A diversity task force led to the addition of African Americans on the board and the hiring of Robert Chambers III, an African American whose position as Three Rivers' director of community programs is funded with support from the Endowments.

"That was very important because everyone who walked into the boathouse saw visibly that African Americans were welcome," says Pittsburgh attorney Steve Irwin, who served as the club's president for three years and still sits on the board. "It's those kinds of what may seem to be symbolic gestures that send a signal to the African-American community that rowing is open to everyone."

Improving board and staff diversity turned out to be the easy part. The daunting challenges began when Chambers tried reaching out to schools, community groups, churches and the business community to find minority students and adults willing to give rowing a try.

He met with coaches. He took rowing machines to lunch rooms. He talked to civic groups. He got a lot of funny looks and a few pointed comments from people, including African Americans, who told him they didn't think rowing was a sport for black people.

"It was really tough at first, because they'd never been exposed to rowing," says Chambers, who had not rowed himself before joining the Three Rivers staff. "Finally, I began to develop relationships with people who helped me get in the doors."

One day he met Katy Samuels, a gym teacher at Westinghouse High who was a Schenley High graduate, knowledgeable about Pittsburgh's black community and city young people. Best of all, she had rowed in college and wanted to get some of her students

involved in the sport. With support from Westinghouse Principal Marilyn Barnett, Samuels convinced several students, including Adams, to give rowing a try. She ended up coaching the All-City Crew.

Chambers' efforts also have led to the formation of a rowing program at Imani Christian Academy, a predominantly African-American school in Penn Hills. Just about to start its second year, the men's four-oared shell crew placed in the middle of the pack during several scholastic regattas this spring.

"At least we didn't finish dead last, which was really significant for a boat full of guys who hadn't stepped into a boat of any kind [before joining the crew]," says Carol Wharton, a fifth-grade teacher at Imani who has rowed for three years with the club's Corporate Crew program. She helped organize the Imani crew, and coaches the team along with support from Chambers and Three Rivers.

The club's efforts to attract African-American adults has proven even more difficult, in part because boating has not typically been a popular activity in the black community. Some have come to dabble, but few have stayed on.

"It's not easy to attract people who have no idea what rowing is and who haven't really been around water that much," says Mort Stanfield, one of the recent additions to the Three Rivers board.

Stanfield, who is executive director of Communities in Schools of Pittsburgh-Allegheny County, and the program's state director, says he believes rowing is a valuable addition to the list of options available to inner-city kids. It's something that can be

Rowers have their own unique language, which they claim has been painstakingly developed over time to provide the most efficient communication system for safe operations on the water. But non-rowers know better: they're just trying to sound cool. Here's a brief glossary of some of the stranger terms and their translations:

**Catch a crab:** You idiot! You didn't clear the blade from the water, so now we've got backwash in the boat and you've lost your oar.

**Way to swing!** This team is a well-oiled monster machine. All bodies, all slides, all drives are moving in perfect synchronization.

**Boat bite:** Who set these rowing tracks on the shell? I've got another cut on the back of my leg!

**Easy oars!** Stop rowing—now!

**I've got open water:** (said by the coxswain, steersman of a racing shell, within earshot of a competitor) Move it! We're blowing these guys out of the river!

**Fly and die:** Those guys went all out for the first part of the race and then they just fell apart.

**Stand on the shoes!** (from the coxswain to the crew) Row your butts off!





In an effort to add some splash and dash to Pittsburgh's rowing scene, and to strengthen the city's long-standing sister-city relationship with Wuhan, China, the Three Rivers Rowing Association and the Steel City Rowing Club have introduced dragon-boat racing to the community.

The ancient Chinese sport is being replayed on the Allegheny River as a league competition, after inaugural races were held during last year's Autumn Moon festival in September.



The program is sponsored by the Greater Pittsburgh Sister Cities Association and the International Division of the Urban Redevelopment Authority.

The 22-man boats fitted with colorful dragon heads have proved enormously popular with groups whose members might otherwise be intimidated by the learning and practice demanded in more conventional rowing leagues. Racing teams use paddles, not oars, and time their strokes to a drumbeat supplied by "the keeper of the dragon's heartbeat." There also is a racer who stands at the back to steer.

learned at any age, and it can lead to academic opportunities through athletic scholarships. But he has never expected diversity to come easily to organized rowing.

"You can't be looking for quick returns when it's really something that takes a long time to develop," he says. "It's not going to be easy."

Many at Three Rivers are quick to point out that African-American rowers aren't entirely without positive role models. Aquil Abdullah of Washington, D.C., was the first black national champion single sculler in 1996.

Abdullah, who has come to Pittsburgh several times to help train rowers of all races, says it's critically important for organizations like Three Rivers to continue pushing for diversity in rowing because of the ripple effect it has in other areas of the larger society.

"Most of the jobs I've had have been through connections with rowing," he says during a break from training with the U.S. National Team in Princeton, N.J. "So the opportunity is there not only for success in the sport but for success in life.... I think that Three Rivers has been an excellent model for trying to bring diversity to the sport of rowing."

By many measures, the diversity program at Three Rivers has made progress. Programs like the All-City and Imani crews are slowly growing. Young rowers of color like Christal Adams have found new opportunities and new motivation through rowing. But progress has been slower than Three Rivers Rowing and The Heinz Endowments had hoped.

Marge Petruska, director of the Endowments' Children, Youth & Families Program, says she has learned along with Three Rivers that diversity efforts in an

activity so unfamiliar to the minority community can be filled with obstacles.

"Yes, goals were set specifically for African-American and young women, and the club has fallen short in reaching many of them, but not for lack of significant effort," she says. "But look at where the bar has been set nationally. We have high expectations, and I believe we are among the pioneers in this effort. It's a learning experience for the field that we're willing to partner with them on.... If, five years from now, you only see white men on the rivers, then they haven't been successful and we'll have to go back and think about other approaches," says Petruska. "What is clear is that for many groups that have traditionally been excluded, they have found success in bringing them in and building programs, and they have made real progress."

Rowing is a sport that teaches valuable lessons, especially to young people who may be more accustomed to negative behavior, Petruska says. "It teaches them about their bodies—about going beyond preconceived limitations and about getting their bodies in sync with others. It teaches them about team competition, about responsibility, showing up on time, about achieving success through hard work," she says.

For Westinghouse Principal Barnett, any sign of progress is a good thing. "They love it," she says of her students in the rowing program. "We just need to keep finding ways to expose more of our students to it. Having Three Rivers and a person like Rob Chambers has made a tremendous difference. It's a slow process, but it's going to happen. I know it." *b*

**“It’s these kinds of what may seem to be symbolic gestures that send a signal to the African-American community that rowing is open to everyone.”**

Three Rivers Board Member Steve Irwin, on the hiring of minority staff and recruitment of African Americans for the board

