

To: Call of the Sea
From: Jerry Belletto, teacher
Samuel L. Gompers Continuation High School
Re: Memo of Appreciation

My name is Jerry Belletto and I work in Richmond, CA. at Gompers Continuation High School. It is the type of school that is conveniently used as a model for discussion of all types of learning and educational problems. Low income, disenfranchisement, student and teacher dumping ground, cultural misunderstandings and low achievement are all here. Gompers Continuation High School is located in the Iron Triangle area of Richmond, one of the toughest and most violent neighborhoods in one of California's toughest, most violent cities. The school structure, a three story stucco block set in an island of asphalt reflects the sense of urban decay, a relict shell with broken windows and mismatched paint. The student body of 150 has generally bounced from one under performing school to another until reaching the final stop, Gompers. Most are severely lacking in credits, usually for poor attendance, and lacking the normal cultural vocabulary associated with their age group. Many either have been, or currently are, involved with the juvenile justice system. Gang activity has deep roots in the area, attested by the recent spree of shootings that have claimed several current and ex-students.

Despite the bleak surroundings and visceral levels of violence and fear, many students continue to see value in getting their diploma, seeing success in school as a way out. There is the hopeful expression of irrepressible human adaptability that all kids have and success stories do occur.

Of all the problems these kids face, the most daunting is the isolation. Our students live in a compressed world whose borders end within the confines of their neighborhood. The majority have rarely, if at all, left the city of Richmond. Most have never seen an ocean, despite their proximity to the Pacific. Few have seen a mountain or a river or a lake or a clean beach. This parochial experience extends to their inner world as well. Their economic and social segregation places similar limits on their worldviews, taste in music, fashion or choice of careers. It is, essentially, a narrow, restricted existence.

The single most fundamental need these kids have is to witness and experience the larger world, a place poorly understood and greatly feared. They need to know that something else is possible, that an alternative exists.

Call of the Sea provides precisely that. The very thought that they could be in such a place as a sailing ship on real water, even taking a hand in working the ship, cracks open the world a little wider. The changes in behavior, given the brevity of the experience, are startling.

The group of students that I led across the bridge to Sausalito rode the bus in muted apprehension with occasional peaks of anxiety. This was thoroughly unknown territory to a group of teenagers grounded in the territorial battles of the streets. Some were surly, others loudly proclaiming their bravado. By the time we reached the dock and stepped on board, most were terrified. They couldn't swim, they thought it was stupid, it was one of

those crazy things white people do. After a few minutes under sail, it began to dawn on them that perhaps this wasn't so bad. After all, the crew from Call of the Sea seemed to know what they were doing. Slowly, they began to follow the crew's direction and moved to the various stations and perform their tasks. They began to see the direct connection between what they did and how the boat sailed. They began to look at the shore racing by; at the birds they have never seen before, calling to each other to check this out over here. Their surliness dissolved as salt water sprayed over them. They began to ask questions and giggle; turning into the children they really were but had never had the chance to be.

The accompanying adults and I just watched, satisfied that whatever was happening was what we wanted to happen. This was real education. This was a learning experience, one that could not be duplicated in the classroom. Our kids brought back with them a new vocabulary they could use to understand issues ranging from fishing to ecology, sea adventures to the age of exploration. They had a larger world to identify with.

The talented group at Call of the Sea will probably never know the full extent of the good they do, of the lasting effects that an experience like what they offer can mean towards breaking down barriers and lifting the veil of isolation. May they keep their work up.