

## Finding Their Swing

UNH alumna teaches STEAM through boatbuilding

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(PHOTO: LAURA SUNDERLAND, RYE JUNIOR HIGH SCHOOL)

There is a rowing term in the book “The Boys in The Boat,” the 2013 Daniel James Brown bestseller about the Depression-era University of Washington crew team, that stuck with Robin Ellwood '85, '93G, '13G: swing. It referred to moments on the water when the rowers, a rag-tag group of underdogs who won a national championship and a gold medal at the 1936 Olympics in Nazi Germany, worked in near-perfect synchronization, propelling their boat faster and more smoothly than they had imagined

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possible.

“I was inspired by the idea of ‘finding your swing,’” says Ellwood, who earned her undergraduate degree in [zoology](#) and both a master’s degree and a doctorate in [education](#) at UNH and heads up the STEAM (science, technology, engineering, arts and mathematics) program at Rye Junior High in Rye, New Hampshire. So inspired, in fact, that she and other staff members created a project-based learning unit to explore how individuals and groups find their swing “in life, in performance, in everything,” she says. For Ellwood’s students, that meant building their own boats.

A 26-year teaching veteran and the recipient of a [2016 Presidential Award for Excellence in Mathematics and Science Teaching](#), Ellwood had been wanting to build boats with her

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students as part of a school-wide theme for years. “It’s been gnawing at me for a while,” she says. “I knew the potential but needed the school to buy in, literally and figuratively.”

That buy-in came with “Finding Your Swing.” Throughout the 2017-18 school year, the theme was used across the curriculum in math, science, art, music and social studies for a number of student challenges. Additionally, the entire school read a young adult readers version of “The Boys in the Boat,” and each grade level spent a trimester — 14 to 16 weeks — building a pair of rowboats by hand.

While the supplies came in the form of a kit, Ellwood says the boats were “built from the bottom up, literally.” There were three different models, which got bigger with each grade: sixth graders built 8-foot boats, seventh graders, 10-foot boats, and eighth graders built 17-foot boats. The oars were all made from scratch.

The yearlong project was documented on Ellwood’s website,

[Finding Your Swing](#), where students can be seen in the school's basement workshop using drills and routers, applying fiberglass, epoxy, paint and varnish and creating the oars from cypress boards. Members of the UNH crew team visited the school and talked with students about their rowing experiences, sharing video clips, stories and tales of how their participation in the sport helped them find their swing on multiple levels. Rye resident Dan Brown, author of "The Da Vinci Code" and no relation to Daniel James Brown, also spoke with students about how he found his swing.

Then came the test. On May 31, Ellwood and her colleagues presented the culmination of the yearlong project at Rye Harbor with an event they called the 2018 Rye Rowing Regatta. And while the day included three grade-specific boat races, Ellwood says the emphasis wasn't on winning or losing.

"We learned a lot about perseverance and working together. Every single student had a hand in this project," she says. As to whether she had any concerns about how the boats would perform, Ellwood says, "We had so much epoxy on those boats, I knew there was no way they were going to sink. They were solid."

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