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After-school program teaches fishing, life lessons

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Susan Cocking / Miami Herald Staff

The Florida Fishing Academy power catamaran leaves the dock at Boynton Beach for a fishing trip with five students and two chaperones from the Seagull Academy.

A back injury suffered by former Palm Beach County building contractor Richard Brochu five years ago is indirectly responsible for more than 3,000 kids and teens learning how to fish.

Out of work and bored, Brochu — an avid angler — asked his young daughter, a student at Poinciana Elementary School in Boynton Beach, if there were a program where kids could learn how to become responsible anglers.

“She was like, ‘No, would you like to start one?’ ” Brochu said.

Poinciana became the launch pad for the Florida Fishing Academy — a non-profit, after-school program that teaches life skills and ethical angling to at-risk youth ages 8 through early 20s.

“We want to raise the next generation of ethical anglers and captains,” Brochu said. “I want people to realize that there’s more to it than catching fish and throwing them on the dock.”

Brochu, a licensed charter captain, and colleague Bob Cawood have created an after-school and weekend program targeted to every grade level. Classroom sessions cover basic fish biology, boating safety, tying knots, and casting practice. Intertwined in the angling instruction programs are life lessons with anti-drug, alcohol and tobacco themes.

Older students with potential interest in a seafaring career learn about charter and commercial fishing businesses, fisheries laws, and advanced skills, such as rod building. The graduates of that program are encouraged to become mentors to youngsters entering the academy.

Students get to put their classroom knowledge to work on board Brochu’s 38-foot custom-built catamaran powerboat.

Money to keep the academy going comes from private donations, charter fishing and snorkeling trips, cruises, and grants from community organizations such as the United Way. Brochu recently won a three-year, \$30,000 contract from the Riviera Beach Community Redevelopment Agency to

teach boating safety, swimming, fishing, snorkeling and rowing to kids in 3rd through 11th grades. Marine artist/fisheries scientist Guy Harvey donated \$10,000 through his Ocean Foundation to purchase equipment for the program, which begins this month.

“The Florida Fishing Academy is one of the finest community outreach programs in the state, and one of our foundation’s favorite educational initiatives,” foundation president Steve Stock said.

On a recent rainy Friday morning, Brochu and Cawood escorted five students — ranging in age from 15 to 21 — and two teachers from Riviera Beach’s Seagull Academy of Independent Living on a half-day fishing excursion on the Intracoastal Waterway in Boynton Beach.

Blustery winds precluded venturing into the ocean, so the group trolled and bottom-fished in the calmer inshore waters. After catching a blue runner and a small sand perch and going fishless for quite awhile, Brochu decided to head back to the dock to see if their luck might improve.

It did. Fishing on the bottom of the boat basin with cut bait, the students caught and released a mangrove snapper, a couple of jacks and a blue runner. Brochu promised to take them out again when the weather improves.

Said student Shenae Singh, 18: “That was fun!”

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