Victor (left) and a friend show off some of their skateboard designs.

Skateboarder Goes Green

Victor Davila combines his love of skateboarding and the environment to improve his neighborhood.

By Siobhán McGowan

Victor's home turf is Hunts Point, New York—and if you ask him, he'll tell you this South Bronx neighborhood is one of the

bleakest places in the United States. “We have a lot of environmental problems,” Victor says. Traffic-jammed highways snake around the apartment buildings. Tons of garbage from the rest of New York City is dumped there. Because the air is thick with truck smoke and trash odors, lots of kids suffer from asthma. In addition, obesity is a problem for many Hunts Point residents.

Getting to the Point

Victor used to be one of those statistics. He was an overweight tween when he joined The Point, the local community center. Victor was home-schooled by his mom all the way through high school. But he would go to The Point for free after-school classes in subjects like art and the environment, which Victor quickly became passionate about.

Around this time, Victor also took up skateboarding as a way to get to and from the center. Victor liked the sport because it wasn’t harmful to the environment—and it was great exercise. Over time, he lost 40 pounds!

This experience gave Victor an idea for a class. He wanted to share his passion for skateboarding since it had made him healthier.

He also wanted to help his neighborhood—Hunts Point could get healthier too. That's why he and two friends started a class called Eco Ryders.

Victor designs a skateboard.

Wheel Deal

Every summer, a new group of about 15 to 20 students meets at The Point. Victor shows them how to make their own skateboards. But before they can keep their custom wheels, they have to earn them. "To receive those skateboards, they have to go through all of our environmental workshops," Victor explains.

In the workshops, the Eco Ryders learn how nature can thrive even in the city. "We talk about different animals that live in the Bronx River," says Victor. An island just offshore is a nesting spot for many species of birds. The Eco Ryders visit a nearby park where they can see them. They also weed and water plants at a community garden. This is a big change of scenery for the kids. They're used to being surrounded by concrete.

"When we're gardening, there are so many trees that you can't really see the buildings," says Victor. "There is nature all around!"

A Brighter Future

Victor, now in his twenties, hopes that kids who go through the Eco Ryders program will start to care about their communities, just like he did. He hopes they will go on to become environmental activists, no matter where they live. He knows that when neighborhoods have serious problems, some people want to hop on their boards and skate away for good. But Victor would rather stay and fight for change. "I don't have to move out of my neighborhood to live in a better neighborhood," he says. "I can make my neighborhood better." One way he would like to do that is by creating New York City's first environmentally friendly skate park. The ramps would be made from recycled wood. It would be the perfect place for the Eco Ryders to roll on their brand-new boards!

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