

ALUMNI UPDATES

Robert Kidd '70 Strives to Bring Diversity to Rowing

By Yelena Shuster '09



Kidd proudly stands inside the boathouse at the Jack London Aquatic Center.

Photo: Yelena Shuster '09

Robert Kidd '70 is no stranger to helping people, having served as a police officer as well as an attorney. So when he realized that his beloved sport of rowing wasn't feasible for underprivileged youth, especially minorities, he helped create the nonprofit Jack London Aquatic Center (JLAC) in Oakland, Calif. "The aquatic center has come to mean more than just a boathouse," he says.

Kidd grew up in Inglewood, Calif., in what he describes as a "white, middle class" experience. Even living in vibrantly diverse NYC during college, his experience at Columbia was all-male and overwhelmingly Caucasian. To ward off loneliness, the American history major joined Columbia's crew team as a freshman, the beginning of his lifelong passion for the sport.

Columbia's 1968 student revolt left its mark on Kidd. Upon graduation, he left NYC to become a police officer in Oakland, which

had one of the highest crime rates in the country. "That was the conceit," he says with a self-deprecating smirk. "I was going to be the good cop."

After four years as a policeman, he enrolled in UC Davis Law School and graduated in 1977. He now practices bankruptcy law at Stein, Rudser, Cohen & Magid in Oakland, and the city's ethnic mix became his motivation for helping the community. Combining his love for rowing with his commitment to public service, Kidd is integrating minority students into the expensive sport.

"I can't tell you how gratifying it is to come here," Kidd says as he gives a tour of the Jack London Aquatic Boathouse. "I built that."

After realizing that "kids like to row no matter what their backgrounds," Kidd founded JLAC in 1994 with three other board members, creating a place for underprivileged Oakland kids to row, kayak and dragon boat race. But it took eight years for the boathouse to be completed. After JLAC lobbied for three years, the city of Oakland engaged the center to build a boathouse with city money in 1997. Construction finished in 2002 after a "political tussle," in Kidd's words, with the city manager over who would run the boathouse.



Kidd (wearing hat) began a lifelong passion for rowing at Columbia in the late 1960s.

Since then, JLAC has developed a number of programs for interacting with the communities of Oakland — or as Kidd says, getting the kids into boats.

Executive Director DeDe Birch cannot imagine JLAC without Kidd.

"He is JLAC," she says. "Robert has been on board since the beginning. He has done everything, whether it's learn about architecture and design for this building to being part of us with the dream here to actually starting the program."

Aside from offering kayaking classes, JLAC created a partnership with public high schools to form the Junior Rowing Team for girls,

made up of 25 girls from six schools. Two are white, the rest Latina. Affectionately referring to the team as “our girls,” Kidd says this diversity is “hugely gratifying.” Most of his girls do not come from affluent families for whom rowing is a sport of choice — in fact, most of the teens do not even swim (which quickly became part of the instruction). Instead of paying the \$1,500–\$2,000 annually the sport usually requires, each girl is charged only \$270 per year (and most are on scholarship). JLAC even transports the students from their high schools with its own vans. JLAC is able to offer such inexpensive services thanks to donations from the city of Oakland and local philanthropic groups.

At the U.S. Southwest Regional Championships in Sacramento in May, the JLAC team was the only one with a significant representation of color, according to Kidd. Though the team didn’t place, Birch is proud of its participation in the competition. “The reality is the top teams there right now were where we are 15 years ago,” she says.

“We’re in front of the parade — facilitating the whole process of getting the sport to change,” Kidd says. “That’s why the boathouse exists — so that kids from the flatlands could experience rowing and kayaking. It’s our mission.”

Joan Story, Kidd’s wife of 29 years, is proud of her husband’s work, even if that has meant late nights away from the family. “I think he’s doing something very special for the city of Oakland, for rowing and for access to sports,” she says. “He’s always been an evangelist for the sport and wants to see more people involved in it. It’s probably a model for what other cities could be doing in terms of outreach efforts.”



It took eight years to turn the dream of the Jack London Aquatic Center into a reality.

Photo: Yelena Shuster '09

Kidd is proud of his work, but not naïve about the diversity issues he is trying to solve. “We like to think we’re having a revolutionary impact, but when I look at the need, it’s flabbergasting. We don’t operate under the conceit that we’re the solution, or even making a dent,” he says.

The JLAC has a distinct Columbia flavor. In addition to Kidd, its Board of Directors includes Michael Wilhite ’78 and Wil Hobbs, Jr. ’69 Business. Not surprisingly, JLAC’s colors are light blue and white.

Kidd plans to step down as JLAC board president in February 2007 — “With Robert gone, there’s going to be a big void,” says Birch — but will continue working to change rowing for the better. He is a member of the board of directors of the U.S. Rowing Association, where he was appointed this spring as chairman of a task force to address issues of “affordability, access and diversity.” In this capacity, he plans to move the rowing community “into the 21st century.” He will work with fellow task force member Previn Chandraratna ’97, who previously coached the freshman heavyweights at Columbia and who now is head coach of the rowing program Row New York.

Kidd’s love of rowing had an impact on his children, who picked up their dad’s love of the water. His son, Christopher, was a rower in high school, and his daughter, Allison ’01, was on Columbia’s swim team.

Kidd reflects that he has come a long way from his “white, middle class” childhood and says, “Diversity is now one of the defining parts of my life.” And he is grateful. “Mainly, because I’m an Oakland guy. I want to do good things for our city. Being in the town that gives you the opportunity to do this is priceless.”

Yelena Shuster ’09 is a native San Franciscan who fancies any opportunity to explore the Bay Area. She plans to major in comparative literature and society.