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HANDS-ON LEARNING

SoundWaters camp teaches STEM, sailing

By Erin Kayata

STAMFORD — Under the stifling August sun, a group of young sailors slowly navigated the waters of the Long Island Sound this week to the cheers of friends and family watching from Cove Island.

"Go Jocelyn!" one girl exclaimed, dancing on the rocks along the water. Across the channel, fellow campers cheered on their

peers by pumping their fists and swinging their hips.

The campers in the SoundWaters Young Mariners Academy had more than just their sailing skills on display. Across the parking lot and up the hill was a miniature science lab of sorts where campers demonstrated the STEM skills they learned through hands-on experiments.

The five-week program culminated Thursday with

the graduation of 29 incoming Stamford fifth-graders.

In its sixth year, the camp is a partnership with Stamford Public Schools, which identifies students who would benefit from the STEM and sailing program.

Over a cup of murky water, Ben Vita explained to his parents, Eylal and Irina, how the campers used a net to catch plankton and identify them under a micro-

scope. But the 10-year-old's favorite part of camp was sailing.

"It's really hard," he said. "I kept trying hard and I did it."

Vita's parents said they were impressed how the camp captivated their son's interest.

"He comes home and is throwing around all this sailing jargon," Irina Vira said. "He makes us jealous."

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Daniela Sosa, one of 19 students in the SoundWaters Young Mariners program, demonstrates her sailing skills on Thursday.

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In addition to learning, his parents have seen his confidence grow as he's learned to navigate the sails and tillers of the tiny boats.

"He's not afraid of the water," his father added. "He likes sailing."

Jess Castoro, an educator for the Young Mariners Academy, said the sailing also teaches teamwork. It complements the group's morning ritual of starting the day with a chant to declare the power of MVPs: motivated, virtues and perseverance. They also give shout-outs to campers who have embodied these qualities.

"In the beginning, they're all hesitant of each other," Castoro said. "It's like pulling teeth. We've seen a lot of growth."

Alisha Milardo, vice president of education for SoundWaters, said the organization coordinates with the school district to develop a curriculum based on the Next Generation Science Standards and their own. SoundWaters will track the campers into the school year to see if their scores improve.

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From left, Sariely Padilla and Amy Albitres, along with 19 students in the SoundWaters Young Mariners program, demonstrate their sailing skills as they skipper an Optimus, a single mast beginners sail boat, on the waters of Stamford harbor West Branch on Thursday. The girls attended a summer camp, which incorporates academic and sailing skills to help boost school performance and confidence.