

WSU News

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Shocker alumni rowers realize dream of building boathouse on Little Arkansas

By Paul Suellentrop



A group of former Wichita State rowers helped raise money, plan and organize construction of the Riverside Rowing Center Boathouse at Riverside Park on the Little Arkansas River.

- Many former Shocker rowers remain active in Wichita's rowing community and help the Wichita Rowing Association by serving as administrators, coaches and participants.
- On May 8, WRA dedicated its boathouse on the Little Arkansas River. The building features space to store shells and equipment.
- Wichita mayor Brandon Whipple, a former Shocker rower, spoke at the dedication.

The Wichita Rowing Association founded Wichita State University crew in 1974, and that shared history remains important to many former Shockers.

On May 8, the WRA dedicated its \$250,000 Riverside Rowing Center Boathouse at Riverside Park on the Little Arkansas River. The project, privately funded, involved many former Shocker rowers who spent decades dreaming, planning and working toward construction. They remain committed to nurturing the sport because of the influence it's had on their lives.

"It truly builds teamwork and camaraderie," said Mark Houser, who rowed at Wichita State and graduated in 1978. "Everybody has to be there on time and make that commitment, or you're letting everybody down. If you don't work as a team, you don't go anywhere."

Incorporated in 1974, WRA rowed out of several temporary homes over its history. A place on the Little Arkansas – good for rowing because of shelter from the wind and calm waters – long stood as the goal. The boathouse, which opened for use during the pandemic, features space for shells, equipment and rowing machines for dry-land training.

WRA operates learners, juniors, masters and recreational programs. (Rowing at Wichita State is administered now by Campus Recreation out of [River Vista Boathouse at 150 N. McLean Blvd.](#)).

"It's nice that younger people can start early on rowing and making part of those connections, being part of a team," said Dee Marsh, who rowed at Wichita State in the mid 1970s.

Work on raising money and planning began in 2012 and picked up momentum in 2017 with negotiations with the builder and the city of Wichita.

"Our first boathouse was a condemned industrial laundry building," said WRA president Jay Pfeiffer, who also rowed at Wichita State in the 1970s. "We've come a long way. This will allow us to build this program."

The dedication ceremony featured tours of the boathouse, speeches and recognition of people who helped the project. Wichita Mayor Brandon Whipple, a former Wichita State rower, spoke and later rowed on the river.



The Wichita Rowing Association dedicated the \$250,000 Riverside Rowing Center Boathouse in May. “It has always been the dream to have a boathouse on the river, and we finally reached that,” said Jay Pfeiffer, WRA president and a former Wichita State rower.

“It’s really a good metaphor for a city,” he said. “Whatever position you are in the boat, really, it’s about moving forward. This is an example of moving forward.”

The WRA Old Guard 8 performed a ceremonial row on the river. That group included Pfeiffer and former WSU rowers Jeremy Taylor, Don Wadsworth, Gary Austin and coxswain Lisa Burns.

“It has always been the dream to have a boathouse on the river, and we finally reached that,” Pfeiffer said. “Rowing changes lives. All of us former rowers experienced that to some level.”

Houser said he attended the first Wichita State practice with then-coach Mike Vespoli, a former Olympic rower and a future coach on the U.S. national team. Houser played football and baseball at Heights High School before coming to Wichita State and felt a void without athletics. Rowing gave him lifelong friendships and lessons he uses in his career.

“I didn’t realize how much I was going to miss the camaraderie,” he said. “You’re trying to build this team. That’s what crew is all about. You want to get the best guys together. They all don’t have to be

superstars, but they have to be on the same page. They've got to move the same, or the boat just doesn't move. And it's the same thing with a company."