



Row New York Gathering

March 10, 2026 - 6:00 pm

CEO Speech, Brigid Ahern

Brigid Ahern: It's so inspiring to be in this room and see the people who helped build Row New York to what it is today. And it's incredible to see all of your faces here. It starts with Amanda. Of course, I need to look straight at you, the woman who had the dream and the determination to realize it. Thank you, Amanda.

It includes so many early supporters, like Dick Cashin who wrote one of the very first checks to Row New York, and continues to support us today, thanks Dick. We have some really extraordinary board leadership here, Ray Hill, who's one of the co-hosts of tonight. Thank you, Ray. David Huntington, who is currently leading our boathouse Task Force, and our current amazing board chair, Francine Chew, thank you for being here. And we also have some longtime board members and partners and some faces that I have seen your name and I've never seen your face before, and I'm so excited that you're here. And one of them that I have to point out is Elise, who was also the co chair of tonight, as

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well as colleagues from New York City Parks who have been the most diligent, patient people in the world, and new faces like we have two new board members in the room, Sebastian Bea and John Lambros, thank you for being here and some new supporters who are just dipping their toes in and just getting used to to Row New York and bringing some fresh energy to the work. So thank you. It's a really fun mix of folks. I also want to acknowledge who isn't here tonight. I did not invite our athletes. I didn't invite their families. I didn't invite our incredible alumni, and I didn't invite our devoted and talented staff. You'll see some of them here tonight, and many other partners and supporters who have made Row New York who it is and are just as responsible for Row New York's success. But tonight I want to speak directly to you who have invested time and energy and resources to make Row New York what it is today.

You built this. You took early risks, you showed up when it wasn't glamorous. You believe that rowing in New York City could belong to everyone, and Row New York did not just happen. It was forged by the people in this room pulling together. So it's a crew I'm really privileged to be part of now. Everyone here knows that rowing has the power to change lives. It's amazing to

look at people who I actually know their stories of how much it has, and everyone knows exactly what it takes, conviction and persistence and just showing up day after day, even when it's hard. So just from the bottom of my heart, thank you for your belief and your persistence and for showing up, not just tonight, but over the last 25 years.

I'll tell you, though, that the world that our participants live in today is a lot different than it was 25 years ago, even 10 years ago, youth sports felt more accessible. College was more attainable. Kids spent more time outside than they did on screens, and that is just not the world we live in today. In the last decade, adolescent depression has increased by 50% so one in five teens now has signs of anxiety and depression. Half of American teens, I know you know this stat, but when you hear it, spend four or more hours a day on screens, and those teens are more than twice as likely to have anxiety and depressive symptoms. At the moment, young people need movement. Most physical activity has completely collapsed. Only about 20% of adolescents get a daily dose of exercise each day, and sports are increasingly pay to play with children from high income families twice as likely to participate in sports than low income families. This is a participation gap that has grown by 50% in the past decade. But at the same time, something amazing is happening, which is that rowing has, in many ways, started to arrive.

Rowing is one of the fastest growing Olympic sports for young people in the United States. Today, more than half of competitive rowers are high school age. Adaptive athletics are also growing rapidly, with more than 60 rowing clubs, which is really crazy, if you think about that. There were just a handful a decade ago. 60 rowing clubs have adaptive programs, and then we have the Olympics returning to US soil.

And here on the waterfront, I'm amazed at the level that New Yorkers are reclaiming the waterfront and asking for city planning processes that talk about how much people want to get out on the water and be connected to it, and there are 2.6 million people in New York City that live within a five minute walk of the water who have never touched it.

So the ground and the water in this case, have shifted. And the need for this type of youth development, and specifically rowing programs like ours, is more important than ever, and the opportunity, if we get this right, is generational.

So for 25 years, as many of you know, Row New York has been built on one belief that rowing paired with strong academic and social support can transform a life, and the results are profound. 100% of our seniors, year after year, graduate from high school, 100% who finished with us are admitted to college. 87% graduate from college, and that's compared to a national six year graduation rate of about 61% and 40% for low income families, but our athletes aren't just getting into college. I just got this statistic that our average GPA of our 120

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graduates in college right now is 3.26%

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so the kids in our class right now that have just gotten into Brown and Dartmouth and Brandeis and Trinity and Vanderbilt are excelling there.

30% of last year's class row competitively in college. And the majority of these athletes come from families that earn under \$100,000 a year, and the majority identify as people of color. 68%.

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The difference we're making is not marginal. It's life changing.

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And let me just tell you about one of our students, and this story sticks with me every single day. We have a student, Erica, who wanted to go to Vanderbilt, and her school counselor told her that she might be biting off more than she could chew, which, for a rower, is just like, yeah, that's not going to work out.

But I'm sure Erica had a moment where she thought maybe they were right, and that's when our team stepped in and we reminded her who she is and helped her navigate the application process and financial aid. And she now has a full four year scholarship to Vanderbilt.

She's also mentored by another Row New York alumni who's at Vanderbilt too, and she's thriving. So all of these numbers and all these statistics, what they really represent, are stories over and over again, of people like Erica, and that opportunity is what we're talking about, the opportunity and the support to seize it.

So people have asked me over the past year, what is it that makes Row New York different? And there are only a few organizations actually in this country that are bringing this level of participation and access to scale the way that we are at Row New York, and we're the only ones who are doing it in New York City, our special sauce, I think, though, comes down to two things. The first is integrated design, and the second is just how awesome rowing is. Okay, so first, first, let me tell you what I mean by integrative design. Every part of our program is designed to work together. So we produce strong, competitive athletes and teams on and off the water. We deliberately build safe and supportive environments. We do developmental

relationships, so we're not just nice to kids. We meet them where they are and bring them to where they can be, and we measure outcomes and intervene early to get them the support they need. And then there's rowing. And I had the benefit of rowing, but I had not articulated it like this before. Rowing loves Late Starters. I even see some Olympians in the room who were late starters, it demands community and unity. It's the great equalizer. You get exactly what you put in, and it pushes you to your limits. You start vulnerable, and you go out on the water and you have no idea what's going on, and you bond and you struggle, and it teaches you things about yourself and your community and your possibilities that you actually did not know before you picked up an oar, and it changes you.

And then, only then, do you actually experience the run, which everyone in this room, that's why everybody keeps coming back, but that's also the story of Row New York, right? Started really scrappy, one boat, one dream, and you bond, you found your rhythm, you pulled together, and you created something truly extraordinary. But now we are in the moment in the race where the coxswain is calling for more. I never really thought I'd call myself a coxswain before, but there we go.

So this next era for Row New York, I think, has three distinct parts. One is to deepen our impact. The other is to broaden our access, and the other is to build a permanent home. So I just want to talk about what those three things are, because I want everyone in this room to walk out of this room having complete understanding of what we're going to do next. When it comes to deepening and sharpening our impact, we are getting clearer about who we serve and who needs this opportunity. How do we open our doors to more people? We're becoming disciplined in recruitment and retention and building relationships with people who can be dependable pipelines for athletes year over year. So the doors stay open. We're strengthening our connection to our alumni and making sure that they stay part of the Row New York family. So the doors stay open for longer, and we're becoming more rigorous about measuring what matters and so we can actually see all the benefits of this when you walk through the door and we're more competitive right now than we have ever been. Last year as most of you know, because I talk about all the time, five of our boats qualified for youth nationals. Right now, I just found out that the top four athletes on all of our competitive squads are at recruitable times. Three of our queens, girls athletes, have 5k times below 20 minutes, which is really incredible for these newcomers, and every single one of our athletes just PR'd on their like, 100% of them just PR'd. So we're heading into spring, excited, but this is more than regattas and medals and headlines. This is really about changing people's lives, and we want to be an organization that pushes beyond the traditional definitions of success, beyond, if you want to race, beyond if you got into college, to how is this actually enriching your life over time?

The second thing is broadening access. So right now, we serve 630 participants in Manhattan/Queens through our competitive and developmental youth program, our summer camps, our school day adaptive program and our scholastic rowing league and veterans and with the right infrastructure, our plan is to double that. So within five years, we will serve over

1300 participants annually. The demand is actually already there, and we're putting plans together to realize it, but we have a waiting list of 15 schools that want to do adaptive work with us, and it should not be the case that we have millions of New Yorkers who have never seen themselves connected to this sport, to the waterfront the way it is right now.

So as fast as we can and as slow as we must on that and then we can't deepen our impact or broaden our access if we don't have a permanent home. So everyone knows that part of the rowing experience is the boathouse experience, and for 15 years, our Manhattan site has been temporary, and right now we don't even have running water or power because somebody stole our solar panels.

Our boats are sitting behind a chain link fence exposed to the elements. We've been broken into three times. Chatz. If you have any Cox boxes laying around, please let me know.

But our athletes and our staff deserve better than that. So here it is. When I came to Row New York, I was handed plans to the most incredible boathouse I've ever seen. It's right over there, the model of it, and you can check it out, and there are little mini ergs, but we'll make real ones happen there. We are sitting on nearly shovel ready plans to build the first boat house in Manhattan in over 100 years. So we are going to get permanent space in Manhattan. This is designed by Lord Norman Foster, who generously did the work pro bono at the center will be the 18,000 square foot mothers boat house, which has five boat bays and classrooms and an indoor rowing Hall and locker rooms and a fully accessible dock. It's an absolute stunner. The project started in 2017 and it took years and a lot of blood, sweat and tears from people in this room to get permits and license agreements off the ground. And when I joined Row New York, costs of this project had risen 50% from its inception. And when I went back and did the math, that's actually not extreme for 10 years over the course of a project, but there we are. So I tried to find a better, more affordable solution, and explored several in depth, and we still have Plan B options, and we are going to pursue those if we have to. But the truth is, this is this option is the best one, in my opinion, because it allows us to move now, instead of having to delay five or six years. It will never be cheap in New York City. We're gonna have to pay for utilities and landscaping regardless of what we build, and we have some funding secured towards it. So all of that happened with all this due diligence. And then I talked to one of our alumni who said something, oh my gosh. Just killed me. She said she was actually insulted that we had never built the boat house, and she felt like we did not believe that our athletes deserved something of this magnitude. And that has just stuck with me. I believe they do, and I believe that this is not vanity. I believe it's infrastructure.

The remaining cost to believe this, to finish this project, is 51.9 million. We've asked the Manhattan Borough President for 19.5 of that, and we're waiting to hear back. And if we've, we've raised enough now that if we go out and raise 10 to \$15 million we can break ground on this project. So my first ask tonight is, if you know the Manhattan Borough President, or you have friends in city council, will you please call them and advocate for this project?

If we secure those commitments, we can actually break ground as early as this fall and no later than a year from now. So we actually have the ability to take this project on right now and do something with it. And talking last night with my husband, the Harlem River, we have this moment to decide, like, is this going to be scenery, or is this going to be opportunity? Like, what are we going to do with this river right next to us that has been used for recreation for years and can be again.

So there are three ways that you can help us, if you're so inclined, and let me just tell you what those are. You can invest in us. You can connect us, and you can participate with us. Earlier, I shared that the next era of Row New York is about deepening our impact, broadening our access, and building a permanent home and turning that vision into reality is going to require partnership and financial investment in Row New York from this community and this room has the power to make that happen.

There are three ways that you can invest in that future. First, deepening our impact, to strengthen the programs and support that our students need every single day to ensure we can have the mentorship and the academic support and win races. That's our operating priority. The second is broadening access, so opening the door for more people and being able to grow and serve more people, that's our growth priority. And third is building this permanent home that's our capital priority, and it will be built by this community and who we include in that community over time. And so I ask you to consider making a financial contribution by the end of June, so that we can get this next chapter moving.

Secondly, you can help by opening doors. Some of the most important moments in Row New York's history have been when people have opened doors to new people. And I've been amazed at the people even sitting in this room, who have opened their homes and have sent me names of people who just completely blown my mind. We have introductions that have led to pro bono support and solved a problem that I actually didn't know that we had a solution to, and those introductions came from people like you in the room. So if everyone in this room made three introductions, we would have over 100 new people as part of our family. And I can't tell you how many times in the past couple of weeks somebody has said, I wish I knew about this sooner. That's an awesome place to be in because it means that there's a lot of potential in that.

And then the last thing is to just keep showing up the way you did tonight. Come meet our students in our program in action. Come see them. There's nothing more powerful than seeing it firsthand. And we have Bow Ball coming up on April 10, which is a young professionals event. There are folks in the room who can tell you about that. We have an annual benefit on October 7, so you can bring a group of alumni to a table there and to share your time and expertise. So to volunteer with us, sit on a career panel, or consider even serving on our board or associate board.

There are also little ways that you can help, which I think sometimes you under-represent in your life. One of them is, we're looking for a much cheaper bus transportation option. It's costing us 1000s of dollars to take our kids to races. If somebody knows somebody who owns a bus company, will you please connect me to that person or somebody with a less expensive SAT prep connection, please call me.

And these kinds of contributions, I think, can sometimes feel small because they're closest to you, but they're the ones that are the hardest to reach for organizations like ours, so please don't think they're small.

Part of this is because this is built through commitment and belief, but also through relationships. So what you have to bring to the table is different from what I'm bringing to the table, and collectively, we can really get somewhere.

You know, one of the things I love about rowing is that it's a sport of inches, right? Every single inch matters all the way to the end. And I am believing right now that we are in this moment where the need is greater and the opportunity is larger, and the stakes are higher than they've been in the past. And moments like this just don't come along very often.

It's rare. So we're ready, and we want you in the boat with us, and I hope 10 years from now, we're going to be looking back at this moment and be really proud of what we built in this second era, and you were here for the first era, so I hope you join us to build the next together. Thank you.