

Q&A WITH LEIGH SHEMITZ

A Sound location to learn on the water

Stamford-based schooner brings thousands of students off coast each year

By John Nickerson

STAMFORD — If you've looked out over the water off the coast of Stamford and seen an old-timey, green three-masted schooner, you may have seen the future of Long Island Sound sail past.

The schooner SoundWaters, based in the city, brings thousands of school children to local coastal waters each year, teaching them about the ecology and delicate environmental balance of the Sound, with the hope of preserving what might be the area's most precious natural resource.

The boat, actually made out of steel, is owned by a nonprofit educational organization of the same name that is based in Cove Island Park.

SoundWaters President Leigh Shemitz, 51, talked to The Advocate about how she came to head the organization and how she keeps the organization the number one choice for area schools that study the science of Long Island Sound.

Q: How did you come to lead SoundWaters for the past 10 years?

A: I had been up at the Yale School of Forestry and Environmental Studies for several years as a student, researcher and on staff, and I realized 10 years ago living in Stamford that what I really wanted to do is to do great environmental work in my own community. I looked around and SoundWaters offered such an opportunity for the community and children and it has been a terrific fit ever since.

Q: What is the philosophy of SoundWaters?

A: We pay it forward. What I mean is we protect the Sound and we do it through education. We have a long-term view and it is especially important because the health and vitality of Long Island Sound is totally dependent on the daily actions of all of those who live around it. So teaching, research and sharing with the community is essential to its future health and vitality for the animals and us.

Q: How do you keep the subject matter of what you teach compelling to schools and kids that come to you to learn about the Sound?

A: We are constantly bringing in new ideas from research, that of ours and others. I think our work with the Diamond Back terrapins is a great example of bringing in new ideas, curricula and new exhibits. We keep it fresh and current and we have a great team here who keep current through their own research and bring their ideas back to our students. We work hard to adapt new tech for our students and our teaching. We recently deployed remote sensors for water quality from our ship and we use that in our teaching, which has expanded opportunities for learning.

Q: What's the biggest challenge for your organization?

A: One of scale. While we reach a phenomenal number of students, over 27,000 per year, we know there are many more who we don't reach yet. And so we do look for ways to grow and expand because we know the need and demand is out there. Q: Is SoundWaters beginning to show off its legacy in Stamford?

A: Absolutely. Stamford has a new and growing relationship with the harbor, the waterfront and the Sound. I believe part of this energy comes from Sound-Waters providing 25 years of learning and exploring about the Sound aboard the ship and at Cove Island. People who know about the Sound and experienced the Sound are acting to make it a bigger part of their lives and our city. I'm immensely proud that this closer relationship is part of the SoundWaters legacy.

Q: So, those 22 endangered Diamond Back turtles that turned up in the boots of Alaskan smugglers late last year and were sent by the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service to SoundWaters to be cared for, how are they doing?

A: The terrapins are thriving. They demand rather intensive care on a daily basis. Every day they get fresh water,

brackish water, food, medicine, and swim time. Every few days they get outdoor time so they can have the sun on their back and walk on real soil and rocks. We are very grateful to the many student interns that have assisted our staff because this is a full out effort and great problem to have. Come fall we will be working on building a newer, more permanent tank system to handle their growing success. Their average weight has tripled. These are happy turtles.



Jason Rearick/ Staff photographer

Leigh Shemitz plays with a terrapin that was rescued at the SoundWaters facility on Cove Island in Stamford on Friday. Shemitz is the president and executive director of SoundWaters.





Jason Rearick / Hearst Connecticut Media

Leigh Shemitz is the president and executive director of SoundWaters on Cove Island in Stamford.