

Adults overcome fears, learn about the Sound

By Austin Mirmina
STAFF WRITER

STAMFORD — Richard Hofmann plucked a horseshoe crab from a shallow container and flipped it over to study its underside, gingerly gripping the shell, as instructed, like a bowl of soup.

Despite spending most of his life near the water — fishing and boating as a kid on Long Island, N.Y., and taking trips to Cape Cod, Mass., as an adult — Hoffman, who is in his 60s, has always been terrified of horseshoe crabs.

On Wednesday night, inside a laboratory overlooking Long Island Sound at Stamford's Bocuzzi Park, he held a horseshoe crab for the

first time and realized they aren't so scary after all.

"I'm still nervous of these things," he admitted.

Hofmann got the chance to learn about sea creatures through a new adult education course from SoundWaters, a local nonprofit that for decades has taught Connecticut schoolchildren about the Sound's ecosystem and how to protect it. Now, the group is expanding that same hands-on learning to adults, inviting them to discover the Sound up-close and develop a deeper appreciation of the vibrant life within it.

"Our belief here is that as a community, we're better off when we're all

learning from the Sound," said Tim Abbott, SoundWaters' assistant education director and the course's instructor. Adults "should have the same opportunities their children have and everybody else in Stamford has to be here and learn from the water," he added.

SoundWaters first hosted the four-week course in the spring and again this fall at its Harbor Center, a sleek two-story facility that opened in 2022. There, the organization also runs immersive marine science programs for students from elementary through high school.

Stamford is SoundWaters' biggest partner — city students in first, third, sixth and ninth grades take classes as part of their curriculum. The nonprofit also works with other schools along the Connecticut coast and on Long Island.

By engaging students directly with the Sound, educators say participants build a stronger connection with the estuary, which SoundWaters calls its "million-acre classroom."

"If you are introduced and engaged in the natural world as a child, you now know what's out there," said Bob Mazzone, SoundWaters' vice president of development. "You understand how (animals) impact our lives and how we impact their lives, and you will carry that experience forever."

SoundWaters wanted to extend that same philosophy to adults and came up with this novel course in partnership with Stamford public schools.

During the program's final session Wednesday night, Hofmann and two other Stamford residents tested oysters for Dermo, a parasite-driven disease that can kill off oysters and is prevalent in Long Island Sound. They diced up oyster tissue, added iodine, and used microscopes to spot infected cells that appeared round and black.

Abbott then introduced them to some of the Sound's more unusual inhabitants: a starfish attempting to pry open an



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Stamford resident Glenn Van Moffaert holds a female diamondback turtle during Wednesday night's adult education course hosted by SoundWaters.

oyster shell with its suction-cupped feet; a horseshoe crab whose numbers have been dwindling in the Sound and whose intimidating tails are actually used to flip themselves over; and an oyster toad fish, a predator that's clumsy but skilled at ambushing crabs along the seafloor. It had a venomous spike on its back with a sting about as painful as a bee's.

Nearby, two diamondback terrapins rested in a container, survivors of a smuggling operation, Abbott said. The female, Queequeg, was roughly double the size of her male counterpart, Jelly, the result of females needing extra shell space to carry their eggs.

Abbott noted the turtle species nearly vanished a century ago but were saved, oddly enough, by Prohibition, which made sherry wine, an ingredient in terrapin soup, unavailable.

For the last few minutes, the trio handled these animals that, until now, seemed so foreign,

marveling at their textures, shapes and surprising charisma.

Earlier sessions had participants don waders and nets to capture marine animals with nets; collect and examine plankton samples under microscopes; and dissect oysters and squids to see how these related species evolved over time.

Glenn Van Moffaert, 36, said he signed up for the course as a fun way to connect with the Sound and revisit science lessons he hasn't done since middle school. The oyster and squid dissections, he said, were a highlight.

Janet McCabe, who volunteers at Stamford's Czeszik Park in the pollinator and butterfly garden, said the course gave her a better idea of what's actually living in the Sound. The experience, she added, left her with "an appreciation for what we've got and we need to be careful with it."

SoundWaters' broader mission resonated with Hofmann, who teaches math at Stamford High

School. He said studying plankton under the microscope revealed a lively organism invisible to the naked eye.

"Living in this area, people should be aware of the Sound, and the benefits and risks, and get as much education as you can," Hofmann said. "The more educated you are, the more you'll be willing to help and support."

The course costs \$134, plus a \$10 fee for non-Stamford residents. The spring and fall sessions enrolled about 15 people total — a modest start that SoundWaters hopes to grow.

Abbott said he expects the program will be back, possibly with new lessons and adventures in the field.

"I think a lot of people touch a microscope in high school and never get to touch a microscope again," he said. "If we can bring that learning back and keep it fun in a light-hearted environment where it's tied to your local environment, I think that's a win for everybody really."

CORRECTIONS

• The date that Benjamin Harrison won the presidential election was incorrect in the Today in History column. He was elected in 1888.

We strive for accuracy. If we make a mistake, we correct it. If you notice an error, please email corrections@hearstmediact.com.

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