

THE TWO RIVER TIMES

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DEBBIE MANS

Midwesterner with Jersey Sand in Her Shoes

IT MAY NOT be surprising that Debbie Mans, executive director of the New York-New Jersey Baykeeper group, grew up on the water.

After all, she carries that passion, whose roots go back to her childhood, in leading a group that advocates the protection of 250 square miles of open water in the New Jersey-New York Harbor Estuary – basically from the Tappan Zee Bridge on the Hudson River to the north, south to Raritan Bay and Sandy Hook Bay, west to east from Perth Amboy to Sandy Hook.

But it may be surprising she grew up on the Detroit River, about 20 minutes south of the city of the same name, in Michigan, in the Midwest. There, the river was in her backyard and her family spent time in the outdoors, including on Lake Michigan.

"I grew up with freshwater swimming – unsalted, as they say in Michigan," said Mans, 44.

But, since 2008, Mans has found herself leading the Keyport-based group on issues related to its tidal waters mission of advocacy. The unsalted Michiganian has been seasoned with salt on a path Mans does not find that circuitous.

"It's the same issue: recreational, access to the water, clean water," Mans said. "No matter where the water is located, it's similar issues.

As the baykeeper, Mans finds herself moving from office work to fieldwork and back. Her group's work includes boat patrols, science projects, raising funds, land conservation, technical meetings with government agencies and community meetings with the general public.

Under Mans' watch, the Baykeeper's recent successful projects include an oyster restoration project

in the bay waters at Naval Weapons Station Earle, running sewage-pumpout boats for recreational boaters in the estuary, educational cruises on these waters and compiling a first-of-its-kind marine plastics pollution report.

"We have a really big toolkit at Baykeeper," Mans said.

"Every day, you don't know what's going to happen," Mans said. "(A few) weeks ago, a million fish died in Raritan Bay."

The juvenile menhaden died because the oxygen level was low in the water. It was probably attributable to a combination of high nutrient levels, caused by such things as fertilizers, and seasonal warm waters, Mans said.

"You have to be ready to go, check these things out, document them," Mans said. "We're trying to act as the eyes and ears of the public. We were corresponding with the state and county agencies."

Besides Raritan Bay, Sandy Hook Bay and the Hudson River, the Baykeeper's coverage area includes all or parts of the Navesink River, Shrewsbury River, Raritan River, Arthur Kill, Kill Van Kull, Newark Bay and Jamaica Bay.

"You get to know the waterways, what things should be looking like," Mans said.

And she oversees these issues in a gale-like work environment – with a staff of six full-time and nine part-time, working under a budget of about \$750,000 per year – with quite the calm-sea aura.

"One of my favorite sayings is, 'Keep calm and carry on,'" Mans said. "It's important for me to project let's-step-back. If I'm losing my marbles, the staff's losing its marbles."

Perhaps the calm is from her Midwestern roots. Perhaps the calm comes from her legal background. After receiving a bachelor's degree in political science from the University of Michigan, where she lettered for four years on the track and field team, Mans got her juris doctor from the Vermont Law School.

"I specifically attended Vermont Law School because it has a great environmental law program," Mans said.

As for her acting calmly, it "doesn't mean you're not passionate," Mans said. And Mans admitted she is a bit of a fish out of water in her native Michigan and her adopted New Jersey – perhaps some Jersey in-your-face attitude obvious when visiting her native state, the calm standing out in Jersey.

"I have Midwest sensibility with a splash of New Jersey," she laughed.

At law school, she developed an interest in water issues. Professionally, she has had different jobs: working on environmental reviews related to land transactions for General Electric, legal publishing, policy and outreach work for the Stony Brook-Millstone Watershed Association and as a policy advisor for Gov. Jon Corzine. Before her work for Corzine, she was the Baykeeper's policy director.

But along the way, "I was always moving toward this career" as the baykeeper, Mans said. In 2008, when Andy Willner, the original New York-New Jersey Harbor baykeeper dating to 1989, left the job, Mans replaced him.

Although Mans does not practice law in New Jersey, she said she uses her legal background "all the time" in her role as baykeeper.

"Critical thinking," she said. "Writing skills, grant

writing and public communications."

Her husband, Marc Holzapfel, 47, is senior vice president and general counsel for the Virgin Galactic spaceflight company. He is from Hunterdon County in the Upper Raritan River watershed.

"That's basically how I wound up staying on the East Coast, married a Jersey boy," Mans sort of sang to the tune of "Jersey Girl."

The couple have two sons: Linus, 8, and Leo, 5. The family lives in Essex County's Glen Ridge, a convenient location along the Montclair-Boonton Line for railroad commuting to New York City – where work often finds her or her husband.

Mans credits her great babysitter for enabling her to balance her roles as baykeeper, mother and wife. In addition, her work schedule of travel around the estuary in New Jersey and New York allows for flexibility, and she can often work from home.

Although from the Midwest, Mans has sand in her shoes through her connection to the Baykeeper's coverage area of 1,600 miles of shoreline.

"Where we want to live is where we want to play," Mans said. "There's this equity in water – clean, safe to fish, safe to swim in, safe to recreate in. We all deserve that."

When all is said and done, the Baykeeper's work can be simply broken down: "We're the voice or the watchdog of the harbor estuary," Mans said.

"I think I'm really lucky to have this job," Mans said. "It allows me to take what I'm passionate about personally, to do it professionally."

By Joseph Sapia

DANNY SANCHEZ

