

THE TWO RIVER TIMES™

SCENE

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VIBE

Maggie Rose headlines this weekend's Rockin' Red Bank Country Music and Food Festival. – Page 29

Cindy Zipf: *Making Waves*

Cindy Zipf doesn't remember her first trip to the beach but her mother told her, when she was a baby and still crawling, she would head straight for the ocean. In a sense, she's has never changed her direction.

The ocean is "a part of my soul," said this Jersey Shore girl.

Zipf is the founder and executive director of Clean Ocean Action (COA), an advocacy group with the mission to identify sources of ocean pollution and then look for solutions.

When Zipf talks about the ocean, there's a twinkle in her eyes and a knowing smile on her lips. It's apparent that the sea holds endless fascination for her.

"It's big. It's beautiful. It's mysterious. It is vibrant. The life that's in it is just awe inspiring from the littlest, tiniest phosphorescent creature to the bizarre to the most spectacular – the dolphins, the whales – that we treasure," she said.

"And then, there's the shoreline. The treasures you find along the shore are a never-ending source of inspiration and are gifts to us. The ocean keeps on giving ... As long as we take care of it, it keeps giving back to us."

The 55-year-old has dedicated her life to caring for the ocean and has worked to make others aware of its importance.

Zipf was 6 months old when she moved to New Jersey. Her first five years were spent in Middletown and then her family moved to Rumson.

"I grew up living along the shore and my fondest memories are of just mucking around underneath the (Rumson-Sea Bright) bridge along the shore over at West Park in Rumson. I spent my summers – and winters – hiking along the shore and beaches."

Zipf, who attended Rumson schools – she is a Rumson-Fair Haven Regional graduate – remembers coming home from classes each day. "The books would be put on a table and out I'd go. I spent a lot of time in Sea Bright."

She attended Fairleigh Dickinson University for a year and then transferred to the University of Rhode Island. She started out studying to be marine biologist, having been influenced by Jacques Cousteau during her childhood. A stint during a summer at the National Marine Fisheries Service at Sandy Hook changed that, she said.

"I was a volunteer, a lab grunt. I was involved in experiments evaluating the affects of offshore drilling... They were doing drilling activities, poking around off the coast of New Jersey during the early '80s. The National Marine Fisheries Service was doing research to figure out what would happen if there was a spill," she said.

"It was extremely disturbing watching the animals suffer through those experiments and I thought, you know what? I want to use science to protect marine life from these kinds of threats and pollution," she said.

She met Dery Bennett of the American Littoral Society, who had an office across the parade ground at Sandy Hook. He became her "mentor and inspiration to get involved in ocean advocacy. It was through his work at the Littoral Society that Clean Ocean Action kind of developed. It spun off and I went with it."

While the organization was officially introduced in 1984 at the Peninsula House in Sea Bright, much of the nuts and bolts of forming the organization were worked out in Zipf's apartment, located on the second floor of what was then Sea Bright Hardware on Ocean Avenue.

"Sea Bright has always loomed large in my life," she said.

The impetus for forming COA occurred when Zipf learned that there were eight ocean dumping sites, located off the New Jersey coast, primarily off Monmouth County.

"I was outraged and there were a lot of people who were concerned and we wanted to do something about it," she said. "It never occurred to me that this was not something that had to be stopped and that when people learned about what we were doing to the ocean, people would rally to her defense – and they did, by the thousands."

The nonprofit started – and remains – part of a coalition of about 15 organizations. "It was a dedicated group of people who would meet and strategize about what to do when these ocean dumping activities were happening."

Zipf immediately took on the task of looking into records, federal registry notices and environmental impact studies to identify when the dumping was taking place and find opportunities for opponents to make public comments. She helped organize efforts to inform the public about what was happening just off the coast and rallied their support to stop it.

"People responded so well and with great interest and commitment, vision and passion," she said. "The beautiful thing about the coalition was that it wasn't just boaters and divers and fisherman, traditional 'fish huggers.' It's many different interests groups. That's what makes the ocean so special, it's women's groups, it's youth groups, it's chambers of commerce and Kiwanis clubs..."

"The ocean is so important and valued so greatly by everyone. It's a treasure that we have that very few people have," Zipf said.

She knows the stakes are high.

"This little body of water off the New York/New Jersey coast is extraordinary ... from a biological standpoint, it's one of the most diverse, I would argue. That's because we have the warm water from the Gulf Stream that comes up along the Jersey Shore and then we have the cold-water Labrador currents coming down. We get the rare occurrence of warm water and cold water combining together so we get both species.

"The waters off the NY/NJ coast are just ecologically remarkable. We have over 26 species of mammals off our coast, four species of seals, five species of sea turtles – and there are only seven on the planet – 300 species of fish, 350 species of birds," Zipf said.

"It's just extraordinary and people are deeply connected to it, particularly in the area. Two River area people are passionate and committed to defending the ocean ... Call out for help and people respond."

COA has recognized and stressed the economic impact the ocean has on the region. "If you don't take care of your ocean, the economy goes to ruin as well," Zipf said.

When Zipf founded COA, New Jersey had ocean dumping grounds and beach closings. The tides would bring in garbage and medical waste. "We were a laughing stock," she said. "Everyone made fun of the Jersey Shore ... It was devastating but out of that tragic time we evolved an ocean ethic that remains strong to this day."

It took years of hard work, countless hearings and many efforts to educate the public but the coalition was able to get ocean dumping outlawed by 2000 – for the first time in 100 years.

The organization then began looking at land-based sources of pollution.

Among COA's signature events is its twice yearly "beach sweeps. During the sweeps, thousands of volunteers comb the shore and pick up tons of trash, everything from bottle caps and cigarette butts to tires and furniture.

On the immediate horizon for the organization is the fight against a proposed liquid natural gas (LNG) port 20 miles off Jones Beach, N.Y. and its accompanying pipeline.

COA and its coalition partners are also leading the charge against seismic testing, expected to begin soon this summer by Rutgers University, that is studying sea level change. "It's beyond comprehension. It would blast the ocean with 250 decibels every 5 seconds, 24 hours a day for 30 days ... Marine life is much more sensitive to sound than we are," Zipf said. "That's a big fight."

The organization's focus is also on microplastics, those tiny particles that can be found in a variety of products, including facial scrubs, soaps and even toothpaste.

"Now that we have gotten rid of the bigger things, we are looking at the microplastics," Zipf said. "If it's getting into the water, it's getting into the fish."

COA is involved now in the nation's first statewide assessment of microplastics.

"Our approach is to identify problems and assess whether they are causing harm. If they are causing harm to the marine environment, we find solutions and then we mount a campaign," she said

"We took on some of the biggest, toughest hombraes out there during the ocean dumping days ... and one by one we were able to shut down the ocean dump sites by finding environmentally sound alternatives," she said. "Now, for the vast majority of the time, you go to the beach and it's safe to swim ... The fish are getting safer but now they are absorbing these microplastics."

The organization has a staff of seven, including those with advance degrees in science, plus legal consultants and hundreds of dedicated volunteers. "Everything we do is based on fact and on law," she said. "When we engage on these issues, we have the facts and the law is on our side or we try to get new ones written."

The most difficult aspects of her job are "bureaucratic inertia" coupled with "political gridlock. The combo is exhausting," she said.

Zipf does have praise for the state's political leaders on the state and federal level who have shown they know what's at stake and have supported the ocean and the organizations formed to protect it.

The ocean is "a nonpartisan zone," she said. "We can and we must work together."

Zipf, who is married to Rick Jones – his mother was a founding board member of COA – said of her work, "as with all passions, it's a joy, it's every day." But, when she does take a break, she can be found pattering in her Highlands garden.

A conversation with Zipf makes it clear that heading toward the ocean for her life's work was the only direction for her.

"People love the ocean, that's what makes it so special," she said. "People should know that they shouldn't take the environment for granted. It's very special because we all play a part ... It's a legacy that we share with our kids."

Those who want to volunteer for Clean Ocean Action or donate to the organization may do so by visiting www.cleanoceanaction.org.

By Michele J. Kubn



DANNY SANCHEZ