

## **By Julie Ham**

Bill Bleyer's retirement from Newsday has allowed him to pursue his half-century interest in protecting the environment.

Leaving the newspaper in 2014 after 33 years gave Bill more time to participate in community organizations, particularly Friends of the Bay, which he has served as president for the last year and a half. He also remains on the board of the Press Club of Long Island, which he joined in 1982 and previously served as president. He continues to freelance for Newsday as well as nautical and history magazines. But the majority of his time has gone into writing five books about Long Island history: the Civil War, Sagamore Hill, the Fire Island Lighthouse, Long Island's maritime history, and George Washington's Culper Spy Ring.

Bill joined the FOB board three years ago and quickly became secretary, then president when Barry Lamb decided to step down after a decade in the position.

"I have a lot of energy," the Bayville resident said, "and I have a lot of ideas. My goal has been to expand the recognition, membership and influence of Friends of the Bay."

Bill has come up with ideas including a terrapin protection program in conjunction with the Town of Oyster Bay to help save the turtles and a series of kayak conservation cruises with the WaterFront Center of Oyster Bay. He has also taken advantage of his journalism experience and media contacts to greatly expand the organization's visibility with increased news coverage.

Becoming president of a local environmental group seemed a natural step for Bill. The Queens native said, "I grew up as a national park junkie and an outdoors person." He has been to all but one national park - Pinnacles in California, which he will be visiting in September. He is an active sailor, kayaker, and scuba diver.

"The first Earth Day in April 1970 made a huge impression on me," he reminisced. Bill believes it is "important to do what we can locally." He has solar panels on his roof and takes walks to pick up plastic on the beach.

The Locust Valley High School graduate pursued his environmental interest when he began attending Hofstra University in the fall of 1970. He wrote music articles for the campus newspaper for the first two years, and then decided to do a news story about the devastating environmental impact of Governor Nelson Rockefeller and master builder Robert Moses' proposed Bayville-Rye Bridge.

Little did he know that an employee who worked at the Chronicle's printing plant had seen the story and pointed it out to an editor of the Oyster Bay Guardian, which had been covering the bridge story for years. "They ended up doing a front-page feature about me -- 'Local Boy Fights Bridge'," Bill recalled.

That one article led to Bill becoming a news writer and then news editor for the Hofstra Chronicle and part-time work at the Guardian, including covering the 1972 Republican National Convention in Miami Beach. Bill then became the weekly's editor after graduating from Hofstra. He worked for six years at The Courier-News in central New Jersey before landing his dream job at Newsday where he wrote about local government, history, maritime issues, and the environment.

When Governor Andrew Cuomo proposed a tunnel that would follow a similar route to the Bayville-Rye Bridge and have many of the same negative environmental impacts, Bill complained to FOB executive director Heather Johnson and Bayville village tunnel committee chair John Taylor that the fragmentation of politicians and civil groups mirrored what happened earlier in the bridge fight, and it was counterproductive to halting the project. The three of them formed the Coalition Against an UnSound Crossing. The group spent six months organizing a board, conducting research, and fundraising that culminated in its first press conference. The next day Cuomo killed the project.

The death of the tunnel plan allowed Bill to shift his focus and free time to FOB.

Bill always gets a kick when people ask him what it feels like to be retired. “I tell them I’m only retired from Newsday, not the rest of my life. I’m as busy now as I was when I worked for the paper.”

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