

FOB secretary focused on the environment since childhood

By Julie Ham

For Eric Swenson, it started with camping.

From a young age, Swenson, secretary of Friends of the Bay, would journey on family vacations into the woods, hiking and enjoying the natural surroundings.

“That was really the seed that started growing in me,” Swenson said.

Then in 1970, the seed germinated with the first Earth Day. His high school closed for a day of seminars on such eco-issues as the lack of legal and regulatory protections for the environment. With a smile, he reminisces of being tasked with lugging a Volkswagen three miles with a rope.

“That probably watered the seed,” he concluded.

But although he was always interested in working for the environment, Swenson “didn’t go to college for that. I didn’t think of it as a career.”

After graduating during a recession with degrees in sociology and political science from SUNY New Paltz, he stumbled into a job canvassing door to door for the New York Public Interest Research Group. “Then I saw a Civil Service test for an environmental position to work in my town of Oyster Bay and I took that test and one thing led to another.”

In 1986, Swenson obtained a law degree from St. John’s University Law School, passed the bar exam and was admitted to practice in New York and Washington D.C. but hasn’t practiced much since. Instead, he has dedicated his life to the environment. His resume is impressive: former chair and current

Village of Mill Neck representative on the Oyster Bay/ Cold Spring Harbor Protection Committee; former superintendent of environmental control for Oyster Bay; president and treasurer of the New York State Association for Solid Waste Management; coordinator of the Town of Oyster Bay Green Energy Task Force; founding member of the Board of Directors of Support for People with Oral, Head and Neck Cancer.

It takes him a while to list all of the organizations as well as provide a short anecdote about each one. Currently, he holds six positions: executive director of the Hempstead Harbor Protection Committee; treasurer of the Nassau County Soil and Water Conservation District; member of the Long Island Sound Study Citizens Advisory Committee; member of the board of the Evan R. Liblit Memorial Scholarship Committee at Stony Brook University; and secretary of both Friends of Cedarmere and Friends of the Bay.

When asked to recall a particular moment in which he felt pride in his environmental work, Swenson mentions how in 2011, he was able to aid the Hempstead Harbor Protection Committee in reopening 2,500 acres of previously polluted bay bottom for shellfishing for the first time in 45 years.

Swenson remains an outdoorsman in his spare time. He enjoys kayaking and hiking. “Last year I took a hike with my dog Zuni,” he said. “We walked in stages ... from the North Shore of Long Island to the South Shore.” Besides his Pomeranian, he maintains his four chickens -- Buffy, Brownie, Speckles, Popeye -- and pond of fish on his Mill Neck property.

Swenson enjoys gardening too. But he admitted “I’m not really that good a green thumb.” He does his best with a hydroponic system supporting a vegetable garden, but he has low expectations for yield. “If it comes up, it comes up,” he said.

While Swenson may have a nonchalant attitude about his garden, he is determined to see Friends of the Bay “grow and thrive to be a consistent presence.”

While he only joined the board in November, he quickly proved to be an adept officer. “He’s a fantastic secretary. He takes amazing notes,” President Bill Bleyer said. “He also brings an environmental science background that we didn’t have on the board.”

Swenson believes everyone has a stake in environmental issues. “Everybody should be doing what they should to help and improve the environment,” he said. “Just do the right thing and base it on the facts, not what somebody else tells you. Do your research.”

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