

HERALD

Stewards of the bays

Combating waterfront pollution

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Gary Smith, of Wantagh, is a man on a mission. As co-chair of the Wantagh branch of Operation SPLASH, he works with his 50 or so active volunteers to clean debris and monitor waterfront pollution in the most easterly section of the Western Bays — Wantagh, Seaford, Bellmore and Merrick.

"I'm the port captain," Smith joked. "That means I watch over the boat and help the captain." The Wantagh crew has its own boat, located at the boat basin in Wantagh Park.

The crew is out five to six days a week, three hours at a time, cleaning up garbage in the canals, bays and wetlands. "We never come back empty-handed," he said. "There's always something out there."

Operation SPLASH, or Stop Polluting, Littering and Save Harbors, is a volunteer environmental organization founded in Freeport in 1990 to address the ever increasing problem of water pollution in the Western Bays. The exclusively volunteer organization with some 3,000 members now has seven chapters with six workboats in operation from March through November each year. Collectively, SPLASH volunteers have removed more than 1.5 million pounds of debris since 1990.

The Wantagh branch was founded in 2001. "I'm really concerned about the environment, about water pollution, and I thought there should be an Operation SPLASH presence in our town," Smith explained.

He contacted Ed Sheehan, another Wantagh resident, who owned a bayhouse "and knew the waters

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here," Smith said. The two men approached Operation SPLASH Executive Director Rob Weltner, who encouraged Smith and Sheehan to form their own chapter. "We both invited people we knew and it's grown from there," Smith said. "People understand how important this is. We always get the thumbs up from people when we're out there."

Today, Wantagh is the second largest chapter of Operation SPLASH, after Freeport. "In 2014, we brought in 50,000 pounds of garbage; that's nine 32-yard dumpsters," he said. The dumpsters are provided by Nassau County and the garbage the crew brings to shore is carted away by the Town of Hempstead. This year to date, Wantagh SPLASH "filled almost two dumpsters of garbage," Smith said. "We definitely make a dent out there."

Back in 2001, Smith said there were wetlands and places in the bay "that had never been touched," he said. "The problem is that there is no one agency out there to clean the waterways — not the Town of Hempstead or Nassau County or the state. So debris just piles up, unless it is a floating hazard, like a piece of a dock."

In the early days they found rusted tin cans, floating port-a-potties and coolers. "But we still get a lot of floating wood and Styrofoam, and of course garbage that comes in from our storm drains," he said. Those storm drains bring debris from as far north

as Westbury.

In addition to cleaning the waterways, the Wantagh chapter supported a plan to hook up the state-run sewage treatment plant at Jones Beach to the outflow pipe at Jones Beach. This would keep sewage from being dumped into Zach's Bay, a beach used by many residents. "We worked on that for 10 years and now it's a reality," Smith said. "We used to go over there and the sand was green and red. Now the beach is sandy white. It just goes to show you that if we help Mother Nature, she'll clean the waters."

But Smith and the Wantagh branch will not rest on its laurels. The chapter hopes to become more involved in educational programs aimed at children and young adults. "We are looking to see if the Operation SPLASH education programs in Freeport and Baldwin can be expanded to Wantagh," Smith said. "But that will take grant money so we'll have to see."

In the meantime, Smith is hoping to attract high school students, 16 or older, who might want to do some community service and "learn about their own backyard," he said. "We also have a Power Point presentation so we can do something with Boy Scouts and Girl Scouts."

Meanwhile, Smith and his crews are still patrolling and cleaning the bays as well as monitoring water quality. "It seems like our job is never done," Smith said. "But it's certainly worth it. The water is beautiful."



WANTAGH'S CHAPTER OF OPERATION SPLASH is out on the waterways five or six days a week. From left are Gary Smith, Sue Wasserman, Barbara Thomson and Captain Tom Hogan.