

## Shore Connected

*The Men Behind Two Popular Social Media Sites About The Jersey Shore*

by Jill M. Ocone

Two trusted Shore area Facebook pages are in the newsfeeds of over 230,000 loyal followers from near and far. From weather and sunsets to lost dogs and emergency information, to keep informed, people are quick to check both the Jersey Shore Hurricane News page, administered by Justin Auciello, and the Barnegat Bay Island page, administered by Jerry Meaney. What it takes to run each page with success is dedication, altruism, and a love for the Jersey Shore.

### **The Birth Of The Barnegat Bay Island Page**

Jerry Meaney has always been interested in photography. Over the years, he has taken scores of photographs, including several while cleaning up at the World Trade Center site after 9-11. As his interest grew, his equipment became more sophisticated, and the retired EMT found he was taking more and more photographs of the Jersey Shore. "At the time, I was posting my pictures to my private Facebook page, but I wanted another outlet. The best thing for me to do was to start a community page on Facebook. Since I took most of my photos between Manasquan Inlet and the end of Island Beach State Park, the perfect name for my page was Barnegat Bay Island," he explained.

In 2010, he created the Barnegat Bay Island (BBI) Facebook page, which now has over 6,200 followers. In the early days, he shared his photos of the area with bits of history

about the locations. The BBI page has turned into a journal of what he sees and how he sees it. "I'm just a picture taker," Meaney said, "and a good day for me is when I am on the beach before sunrise to capture the beginning of a new day."

One of Meaney's favorite places to start his day is on the Point Pleasant Beach side of the Manasquan Inlet. His extraordinary talent in composing images of the sunrise with the rocks, trawlers, surfers, and boats leads to comments and likes from people all over the world. "BBI followers feel that the Jersey Shore is part of them, no matter where they are. They look at my pictures of the beach, of the shore, and it brings them back here. They are here in mind, even though they aren't physically here," he said.

While the BBI page serves the Jersey Shore community with information and images, Meaney has established a style that is more of

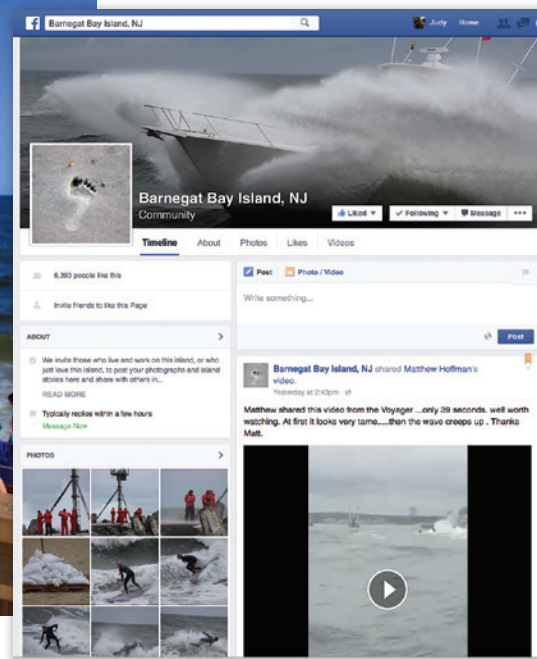
a daily journal versus an outlet for news stories. He estimates that on more than two hundred days a year, he is somewhere on a beach in Ocean County taking photos. Meaney said, "Surfers in Bay Head and at Jenks, the Bay Head beaches, from the Inlet down to Seaside, I'm there in the freezing cold, rain, heat, humidity, snow. Whatever weather condition, I'm there to photograph what I see."

Meaney is currently captain of the Point Pleasant Beach First Aid department, which he has been involved with as a volunteer EMT since 2001. As such, his commitment to the community takes him to events that other people might not have access to. However, he is careful to put his role as a first responder before his role as a storyteller. "I do not want the BBI page to be political in any way," he explained. "I do not want anything negative posted by others, either. Too many people think they have the right

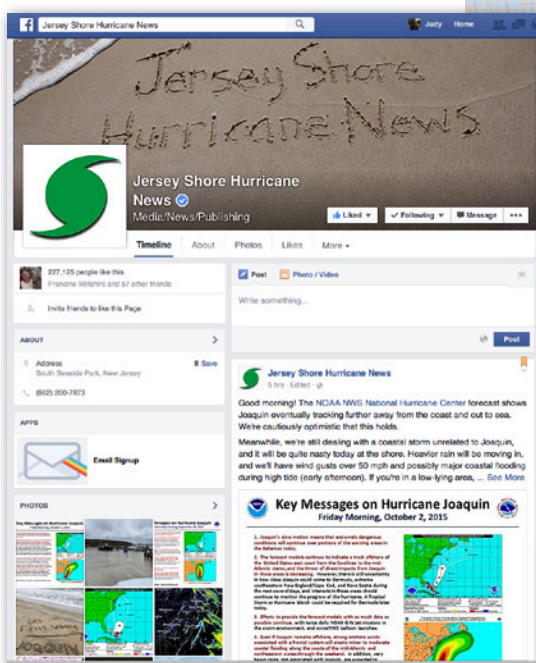
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**Jerry Meaney, creator of the Barnegat Bay Island Facebook page.**



**Justin Auciello, creator of the the Jersey Shore Hurricane News Facebook page.**





to negatively comment on my posts. Not on my page," he said.

A resident of Point Pleasant for forty years, Meaney has always loved the Jersey Shore. He explained, "People from Jersey go to Jersey Shore beaches. They grew up here, have memories here, so they are attached to it. Jersey sometimes is underrated, and those who don't know anything about it have images in their heads of the Turnpike or industry. That's not Jersey. Instead, Jersey is a wonderful place, and when you are at the Shore, you don't want to leave it."

Followers of the BBI page know that Meaney's sidekick is Kona, an eight-year-old Jack Chi dog. However, what most people do not realize is that Meaney usually holds her while shooting his images. "That's another skill level all its own," he remarked, "and people have recognized me on the beach simply because they recognize her." Kona was a one-year-old rescue when Meaney and his wife, Carol, adopted her, and she is extremely protective of him. "She's always there, and doesn't like when people approach me, even my wife," he laughed.

### Hurricane Irene Initiates A New Way Of Reporting

Justin Auciello, a helper at heart, always had an interest in technology and writing. Besides being the editor-in-chief of his high school newspaper, he had no formal training in journalism or communications. Rather, the Jersey Shore born surfer happens to be an urban planner/land consultant and is more comfortable in board shorts and bare feet than a suit and tie.

With Hurricane Irene ready to pound the Jersey Shore in August 2011, the lifetime Seaside Park resident knew he had to do something to help get storm-related information out to his neighbors. He decided to create a Facebook page. "I had all of these ideas in my head about how to connect people on Facebook, and I made it happen. I knew it would work," he said. And he was right: with his first post, the Jersey Shore Hurricane News (JSHN) was born. Within hours, the page had over a



*From the Barnegat Beach Island page: Meaney's photo of a house on East Avenue at North Street in Bay Head during Superstorm Sandy, October 29, 2012. An ABC-7 news camera crew stands next to the home as the ocean begins to wash over the dunes. The home completely disappeared during the storm.*

Jerry Meaney

thousand followers who were able to share information, emergency announcements, and storm updates about the storm.

After Irene, the JSHN page kept a strong presence and morphed into a source for Jersey Shore news and weather. The page's popularity grew as people realized they could trust its posts and information. Auciello said, "It's the place to go for news and information, and to get or receive help."

A little more than four years later, JSHN now has over 226,000 followers, or as Auciello likes to say, "over 226,000 reporters," and has set the standard for citizen-based journalism. "JSHN started out as my way of helping, and it turned into a product that brings people together to inform and help," he said. The page has evolved into covering news, traffic, weather, and community information in real time. The two-way news outlet encourages contributors to share photographs and information. Common posts and topics over the years have included car accidents, traffic delays, fire/police/first aid activity, lost/found pets, community events, found items, sunset/sunrise/weather images, and more.

"It was never my intention to be a journalist," Auciello explained. "I've always enjoyed writing, but it was never supposed to be my career, and now it is, in a way. There is a purpose, a reason why JSHN was a success. That is the connection to each other, the connection to each and every citizen who reports about something that is going on."

The JSHN network now includes Twitter, Instagram, a Newsworks website, and the original Facebook page. Auciello is the administrator of the entire network, which set the bar for community reporting. Since 2011, he has traveled the country speaking at colleges and media conferences about the success of JSHN and how it became a model for citizen journalism. He said, "One of the tenants is that you never know what is going to happen." And those words couldn't be truer.

### Storm Of The Century: Hurricane Sandy

Meaney, with the personal journal-style BBI page, and Auciello, with the journalistic and news-oriented JSHN page, have worked together several times by sharing information from each other on their respective

pages. What changed the Jersey Shore the most was Hurricane Sandy in October 2012. Both took a very active role in getting the latest information out to their followers, starting days before the storm hit.

Meaney was on scene near North Street and East Avenue in Bay Head as Sandy approached on Monday, October 29, 2012, when the ocean began to wash over the dunes. "The ocean water just went over the dunes into the street, and the dunes began to wash away quickly. I knew it was going to be bad," he said. He posted photographs to the BBI page, and one of the photos was of an ABC-7 news camera crew next to a home that ended up completely disappearing as a result of the storm. "I probably got the last photo of that house," he said. When the surge became a bit stronger, Meaney knew he needed to leave the area, and he hunkered down in the Point Pleasant Beach First Aid building with his fellow volunteers.

As people were losing phone service and power during the storm, Auciello kept a close eye on posts to the JSHN page. Sandy came closer, the water rose, and all of a sudden, Auciello noticed a change in the types of posts being made. He explained, "Hundreds of people needed help, from southern Ocean County to northern Monmouth County. These people were without phone service or could not connect on their cell phones to 911. They commented on JSHN that help was desperately needed. I quickly wrote a post that said, 'Respond here

if you need help with location and phone number.' Emergency responders began monitoring the posts, and people were able to be rescued as a result. JSHN turned from a facilitator of information to a lifeline for help. And looking back, the most rewarding thing, as this storm destroyed my community, was that JSHN was able to provide help to so many of its neighbors."

During the days after Sandy, both the BBI and JSHN pages were a lifeline to so many, because even without power, people were able to charge their phones, computers, and tablets from car batteries or generators and then have access to Facebook on their devices. The non-stop posting of information and photographs further connected every follower from near and far: posts such as various personal and sentimental items washing up on the beaches, the reuniting of these items with their owners, collection drives, places to go for supplies or clothes, organizations who could help, the location of electric crews and warming centers, volunteers needed or available for cleanout of flooded homes...the list goes on and on. With intrinsic selflessness, both Auciello and Meaney put the entire Jersey Shore community first by taking an active role in getting the most up-to-date information out there.

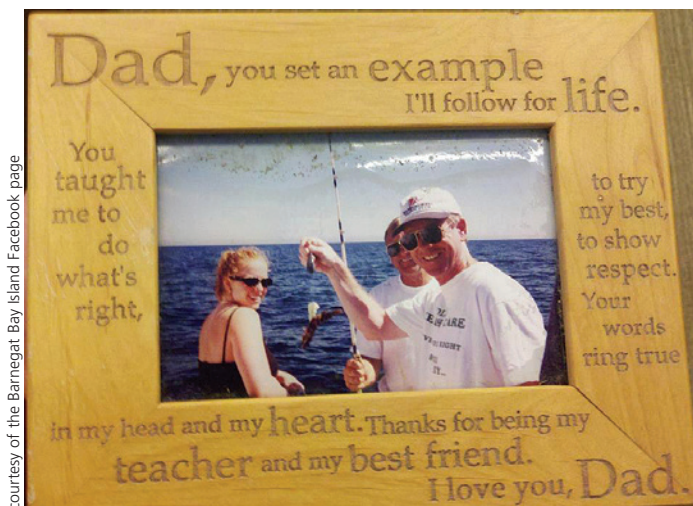
### Memories Lost: The Seaside Fire

Fast forward eleven months later to another local tragedy: the Seaside boardwalk fire on September 12,

2013. Auciello was sitting on his couch in south Seaside Park when the first alarm went off, at approximately 2:15 PM. "I turned on my scanner, and it came across as a smoke condition on the boardwalk. I didn't think it was anything serious, but then the alarm went off again, and again. Within minutes, it changed into a call for a structure fire at Kohr's [Frozen Custard]," he said. With a sick feeling in his stomach, he grabbed his cell phone, threw on his flip-flops, drove ten blocks north, and was reporting from the scene within minutes. "When I arrived, only one fire truck was on scene, and Kohr's was in flames. I could not believe what I was seeing," he said. The second image he took (and posted at 2:40 PM—less than thirty minutes from the first alarm), turned out to be one of the most iconic images from the fire: a firefighter running in front of a fully-engulfed Kohr's.

Auciello reported straight from the scene of the fire for at least sixty minutes before other news outlets began covering the story. However, this disaster was personal for Auciello. He elaborated, "This is where I grew up. The boardwalk. It's everything. You go up there as a kid for ice cream or to ride the rides, then as you grow into a teenager, you shift focus to the arcades and to just hanging out. Then when you turn twenty-one, there's the bar scene. Every stage of life led to a new experience on the boardwalk. It was 'my' boardwalk. And I watched childhood,

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*After Sandy, the non-stop posting of information and photographs further connected every follower from near and far. Some posts reunited various personal and sentimental items that washed up on the beaches with their owners. Upon seeing this framed photograph on the Barnegat Bay Island site, its owner "Aimee" wrote: "That's me and my dad!!!! A friend just saw this and called. Thank you so so much!! I'm so happy you found this, thank you!! I have such mixed emotions...so happy it was found but sad that it was washed away in the first place along with so many other personal items from everyone affected. Reaching out like this means so much. Thank you."*



*From the Jersey Shore Hurricane News page: Auciello photographed and posted—less than thirty minutes from the first alarm—what turned out to be one of the iconic images from the Seaside boardwalk fire, September 12, 2013.*



Justin Auciello

my memories, go down in flames.”

Despite the personal connection to the story, he remained objective and did the job his followers expected of him. As a result, Auciello’s video, photographs, and posts to the JSHN page went viral. They were viewed and read worldwide both in real time as the fire happened and for days in covering the aftermath.

Meaney’s role at the Seaside fire was that of first responder. He was on scene with the Point Pleasant Beach First Aid to assist wherever needed during the fire and its aftermath. “I was able to take a few photos, but I put my role as responder before my role as photographer or storyteller,” he said. His big story was yet to come, a little over a year in the future.

### **An Unwelcome Visitor: The Box Jellyfish**

On October 21, 2014, Meaney happened to be in the right place at

the right time—twice. Not only did he capture a waterspout off Lavallette that day, he also happened to notice something very strange in the water off Baltimore Avenue in Point Pleasant Beach. “It would go under water maybe a foot or two, and then it would swim up along the surface. It kept going to the same spot, over and over,” he said.

After shooting several videos and photographs of the creature and posting them to the BBI page, some contributors jokingly commented that it was an alien. However, others identified it on the first try: a box jellyfish, or to be technically correct, a *Tamoya haplonema*.

The fact that the box jellyfish was alive at the Jersey Shore in October created a buzz worldwide. The find was extremely rare because this particular type of jellyfish is usually found in warm, coastal waters. Meaney said, “I was happy as could

be,” he said. “Besides the fact I didn’t know what it was, I was happy that I got those pictures. This was something I’d never seen before.” His video and photographs went viral.

One month later, Meaney found another box jellyfish on the beach in Bay Head, but this one was dead. About half a dozen others washed up along northern Ocean County beaches after Meaney’s first find in October.

Because the venom on its tentacles can cause a terrible sting, the box jellyfish is considered to be very dangerous. With peaked interest, many organizations publicly discussed the dangers, including the Department of Environmental Protection, the New Jersey Sea Grant Consortium, and Save Barnegat Bay.

Allen Collins, of the Smithsonian Institute, is a jellyfish expert who examined one of the box jellyfish from New Jersey. Collins was quite



certain that it was of the *Tamoya haplonema* species. In April 2015, scientists confirmed Collins' hypothesis through DNA testing. Experts believe that the jellyfish may have ridden the Gulf Stream north, and a storm may have directed them towards the Jersey Shore.

In May 2015, as the summer season approached, Meaney was featured on a Weather Channel segment about the rarity of box jellyfish sightings and the dangers associated with them. Originally broadcast on May 19, the video is one of the most popular on the Weather Channel's website, with over one million views. Meaney said, "I was able to get the word out about this dangerous creature, and more people know about them now. Hopefully they will listen to the experts and not touch them if they happen to encounter a box jellyfish."

While several Portuguese man 'o wars were discovered along Ocean County beaches this summer, Meaney has not seen any box jellyfish since last year. "I still look every day. You never know what is going to be swimming around in our waters," he said.



**On October 21, 2014, the same day he photographed the box jellyfish in Point Pleasant Beach, Meaney photographed this waterspout off Lavallette.**

### The Rewards

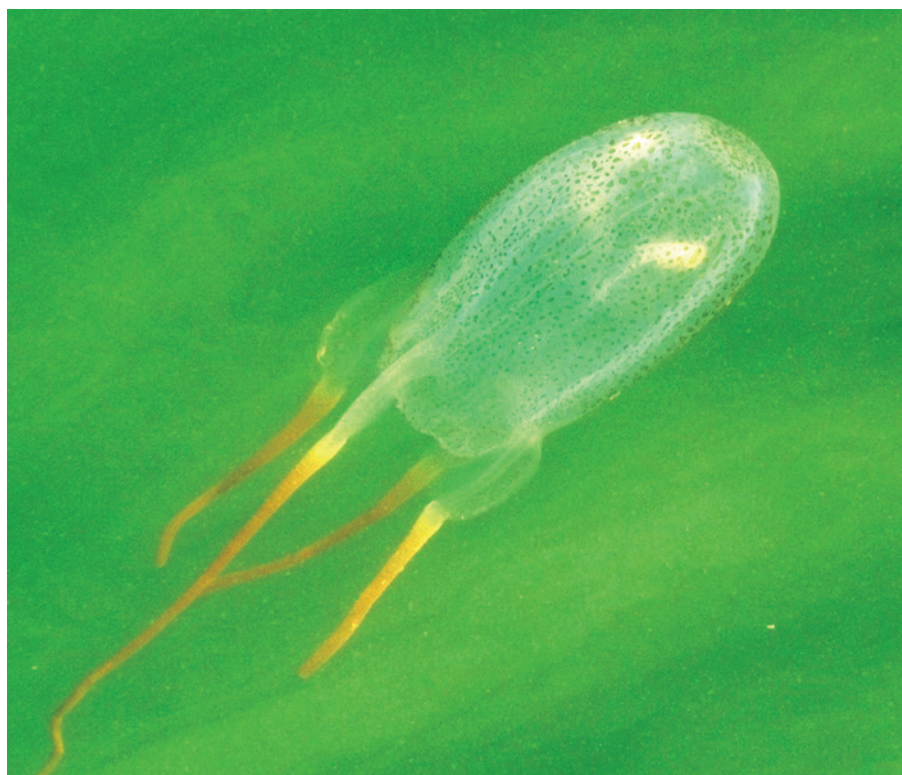
With so many negative stories about social media frequently in the news, both Meaney and Auciello have demonstrated the many positive aspects through their tireless administration of their respective Facebook pages.

"The Barnegat Bay Island page definitely serves the community,"

said Meaney. "While I do not post a lot about the weather or traffic like JSHN does, we share information with each other through messages, and what the community needs to know, they know from either or both the BBI and JSHN pages."

Auciello echoed Meaney's sentiments, saying, "The rewards are day to day. What I enjoy most is that I never know what is going to happen that day. Both the JSHN and BBI pages, while a bit different in style, take an active role in the community. I have found the good side of social media. People ultimately do care about each other, and that is proven over and over on our pages."

With the ideas of informing and helping at the forefront, both the Barnegat Bay Island and Jersey Shore Hurricane News pages connect hundreds of thousands of people from near and far and bring news from the Jersey Shore worldwide every day. ♦



**Meaney's posts of the dangerous box jellyfish—an extremely rare find for New Jersey coastal waters—went viral, catching the attention of many organizations, and was featured on the Weather Channel's website.**

For more information:

#### **Barnegat Bay Island:**

Facebook: [facebook.com/BarnegatBayIsland](https://www.facebook.com/BarnegatBayIsland)  
YouTube: [youtube.com/user/jerry83697](https://www.youtube.com/user/jerry83697)

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