

Britta Wenzel

The Caretaker of Barnegat Bay

by Jill Ocone

When you combine a formidable Norwegian ancestry with a lifetime of living along Jersey Shore waters, the result is a passionate Jersey Girl with an unparalleled appreciation for the local ecosystem.

Meet Britta [Forsberg] Wenzel, the Executive Director of Save Barnegat Bay.

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Above: Britta Wenzel, Executive Director of Save Barnegat Bay.

Opposite page: Sunset on Barnegat Bay from Island Beach State Park.

Wenzel was born in 1970 and raised along the northern bay, where it bends westward along Point Pleasant, past her namesake, Forsberg's Boat Works, becoming Beaver Dam Creek. The bay has provided the Forsberg family with a livelihood from the early twentieth century to today. With the bay at the core of Wenzel's heart and soul, she's been actively advocating for its protection since she was young.

After graduating Point Pleasant Boro High School in 1989, and while attending Ocean County College, Wenzel became very active with a student environmental group called the Environmental Education Network (EEN). One of her first projects with EEN was instituting a textbook recycling program. "Instead of putting old textbooks that were no longer being used into a landfill, we made them available to prisons and lesser advantaged schools," she said. She was also instrumental in bringing Woodstock icon Richie Havens to perform at an early 1990s Earth Day Celebration at Ocean County College.

It should come as no surprise that Wenzel was named Ocean County's "Environmentalist of the Year" at only eighteen years old. At the time, she assisted with writing the New Jersey School Source Separation and Recycling Act, which was sponsored by local legislators including Marlene Lynch Ford.

After attending an environmental conference at Stockton College (now Stockton University), she transferred there and became involved with campus, state, and national environmental groups. "I helped to perform energy and waste audits on campus and advocated for wetlands protection and open space preservation. That was the way to solve problems for people. Environmental and social justice issues needed action, and I couldn't understand why humanity couldn't work on the solutions," said Wenzel.

In an unexpected twist, Wenzel ended up challenging Stockton over their plan to develop a parking lot in the buffer of an Atlantic White



Wenzel welcoming volunteers at the Barnegat Municipal Dock during the 2018 "Barnegat Bay Blitz," an annual clean up event.

Cedar Bog and won her case, but she had to leave college to help care for her ailing father. Shortly after, while working at Red's Lobster Pot in Point Pleasant Beach, she met her future husband, Brick. "When you grow up and live in a coastal community, almost everyone you know is involved in that economy...they cook at a restaurant, bartend, fish or work at the dock, retail, and of course, tourism," said Wenzel. "My husband was in the commercial fishing industry, and with my family's boatyard, we ended up knowing a lot of the same people," she said.

After marrying in 1997 and settling near Brick's family in Lavallette, the Wenzels operated Salty's, an ice cream parlor, eatery, and gift shop. Unfortunately, Salty's was heavily damaged by Superstorm Sandy, but by that time, Wenzel was already at the helm as Save Barnegat Bay's Executive Director. "We tried to reopen the store, but it was just too much," Wenzel said.

Before the Wenzels survived Sandy, they survived running against each other for Lavallette Town Council, with sitting Councilman Brick on the Republican ticket and Britta on the Democratic ticket. "We showed everyone that we can get along as husband and wife despite our differ-

ent party affiliations," Wenzel said. "The first time I ran against him I lost, but then, I eventually won with less than two hundred registered Democrats in town which was a little unusual."

As a Lavallette Councilwoman from 2004 through 2009, Wenzel believed that local politics shouldn't necessarily be about party lines but about what's best for the community. "The police, public works, schools... you want them to do a good job with the best value regardless of party affiliations," Wenzel explained.

While a Councilwoman, Wenzel worked hard to improve Lavallette's recycling rates and garbage schedule, and her efforts led to the rebuilding of the Lavallette boardwalk, which unfortunately, also fell victim to Sandy. She stated, "I loved my time in local public service. I enjoyed helping people and solving problems because it made us serve each other better."

Despite an unsuccessful bid for Lavallette Mayor, Wenzel's passion for social justice continued to burn. "I always want to fight for better outcomes when I see something unjust," she said. She was already on the Board of Directors of Save Barnegat Bay, and instead of running for public office again, she chose the

Katie Ribasam

bay. "I'm a local person who grew up on the bay at a boatyard. I love the sound of the bay, the feel and beauty of the bay, and the life it gave me. I wanted to fight for that full time," she said.

What is now known as Save Barnegat Bay was founded in 1971 as a non-profit organization and originally called the Ocean County Chapter of the Izaak Walton League of America. The group was started at a kitchen table by Charles Hudlund and neighbors who were concerned about plans to develop what are known today as the F-Cove and Traders Cove at the northern end of the bay. In 1985, the group's name was changed to Save Barnegat Bay, and it has kept its non-profit status since inception. In April 2012, after spending thirteen years as a board member, Wenzel was named executive director.

"The public thinks Save Barnegat Bay has been around for the last thirty years or so, but the health of Barnegat Bay has been in decline for more than fifty years," Wenzel explained.

An adverse effect of Ocean County's rapid growth and constant development over the last half century has been polluted runoff into the watershed, which has been a major contributing factor to the bay's deterioration. As the bay's health became threatened, the group refocused its attention from preservation of open space to the numerous factors that affect the bay and its ecosystem.

Barnegat Bay's brackish water runs deep through Wenzel's veins. "I grew up on the bay. I remember when there were so many more crabs and fish because the water was cleaner. Maybe folks can't perceive something is wrong because they haven't lived here all of their lives, but I have. I've been called an 'environmentalist', but I think everyone wants clean water, clean air, and clean food," Wenzel said.

Since 2002, invasive stinging sea nettles have made swimming in Barnegat Bay nearly impossible. The sea nettles are a result of development and runoff into the bay.

Wenzel explained that the small creatures pack a giant sting that has sent many a swimmer seeking medical attention. "As development increased, the sea nettles have more places such as floating docks, pilings, and bulkheads to cling to and reproduce," she said. Other problematic jellies such as box and clinging jellyfish have also arrived in the bay during recent years.

As executive director, Wenzel works directly with local and state officials, policy makers, legislators, and residents. By combining her background in politics, her experience from running local businesses, and her wisdom gleaned from her environmental activism, Wenzel recognizes her expertise strengthens the impact made by the non-profit organization. "It's unusual for a director to have all of those backgrounds and connections, and it's a privilege to serve in this position because I am able to bring all of that together in our effort to restore Barnegat Bay," she said.

Save Barnegat Bay is unique in that it both advocates for the bay by being a strong and independent voice while educating the Jersey Shore community about the bay's natural, economic, and recreational resources that can be enjoyed by everyone. Wenzel said, "Whether you are politically on the far left, the far right, or in the middle, it doesn't matter how you come to us if you are in it for the bay."

It's not always easy when the

organization tries to resolve issues with development, runoff, and water quality. In fact, it can get downright messy. "It's okay if people disagree with me, but they have to remember we are fighting for our quality of life and the local economy along the Barnegat Bay Watershed. That involves thirty-seven municipalities with mayors, councilmembers, green teams, environmentalists, politicians, business people, and residents. Maybe we won't always win, but we are there for the bay, no matter what," she said.

Wenzel works hand in hand with Save Barnegat Bay's Board of Directors and president, William deCamp, Jr. "That shows the stability of our organization," she said. "He's been president for over thirty years."

Superstorm Sandy devastated Save Barnegat Bay's Lavallette office in 2012. Three relocations later, they moved to their current location in 2017—a forty-acre site that is owned by Toms River Township and was purchased with the support of Green Acres Funds. The new location is more than just an office. It ushered in the dawn of the EcoCenter. "The EcoCenter is a wonderful home base for education, advocacy, and engagement," said Wenzel.

Under Wenzel's leadership, Save Barnegat Bay's focus on education and community engagement led to

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Save Barnegat Bay's EcoCenter in Toms River.

Save Barnegat Bay's EcoCenter



Save Barnegat Bay's EcoCenter is located where the bay meets the land in Toms River and is also home to the mouth of the Long Swamp Creek, which feeds the bay with fresh water. The property is open to the public and loved by the surrounding community. It is used regularly by the public for dog walking and enjoyment as it has extensive foot trails and a white, sandy beach.

Their Mission

The EcoCenter's Mission is to increase science literacy about Barnegat Bay, to model bay-friendly practices and behaviors, to create a community gathering place while maintaining the property, to provide a key opportunity to expand partnerships and increase volunteerism, and to expand programs responsive to the needs of the community.

Environmental Education Programs

The EcoCenter offers a wide range of environmental education programs focused on the restoration and protection of the bay. The center is a gathering place for meetings, talks, exhibits, and public educational programs, and it further strengthens Save Barnegat Bay's commitment to education, conservation, and environmental stewardship in the community.

Activities

Activities at the EcoCenter include guided nature walks

and talks, bird counts, outdoor classroom areas, strategically located educational kiosks, workshops, seminars, hands-on activities, demonstration gardens and low-impact landscaping, kayaking and boat-based educational programming, clean-ups, environmental inventory, water quality testing, and research. Additionally, there is opportunity for restoration in targeted areas on the property including removal of invasive plant species and the replanting of native plants.

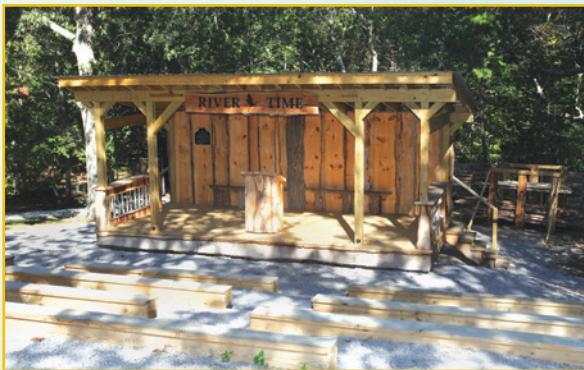
The EcoCenter is in need of the following items: tools (shovels, rakes, screw drivers, a Dremel tool, etc.), waders (kid and adult sizes), craft supplies, paper towels, snacks for volunteers (granola bars, fresh fruit, chips), office supplies, a bike rack, and an outdoor grill. The EcoCenter is located at 117 Haines Road in Toms River.

For more information, visit www.savebarnegatbay.org. You can also find them on Twitter, Instagram, and Facebook @SaveBarnegatBay. To contact Save Barnegat Bay, call (732) 830-3600 or email: info@savebarnegatbay.org.



Honeybee apiaries

Jill Ocone



Outdoor classroom

Jill Ocone

piloting a number of free programs for the public both at the EcoCenter and throughout the Barnegat Bay Watershed. This October, Save Barnegat Bay will host its inaugural, three-day conference titled "Charting a Course for Barnegat Bay," which is open to the public. Attendees will have the opportunity to interact directly with representatives from the New Jersey Department of Environmental Protection while learning about the bay's next chapter as a natural resource for the Jersey Shore and plans for further improving its water quality.

Wenzel recommends that all Jersey Shore residents, especially those who are newer to the watershed area, learn the area's history so that they can fully appreciate their connection to the local environment. "People miss the fundamentals of observation," she said. "Being local is about opening your eyes and ears, knowing your neighbors, and paying attention. Find an old-time local, perhaps the guy down the street with the overgrown yard. These folks know more about your neighborhood and the bay than anyone else."

Wenzel's passion for advocacy, devotion to the ecosystem, and leadership as executive director has undoubtedly been one of the driving forces behind the EcoCenter's substantial growth and the organization's commitment to charting a course for a cleaner Barnegat Bay.

"I don't walk away when I see something I can fix. A healthy bay is what every single person living at or visiting the Jersey Shore deserves," she said. ♦

Save Barnegat Bay is a registered, community-based nonprofit 501(c)(3) organization with a record of accomplishment. Many members and donors generously support the work of the organization with their time, and the group provides flexibility and a strong foundation from which to grow. Volunteers and interns are always welcome. If you are interested in volunteering, visit www.savebarnegatbay.org/participate.

Save Barnegat Bay accepts donations to their general fund and as tribute or memorial gifts. To make a donation, visit www.savebarnegatbay.org/donate.