

## LONG ISLAND / LI LIFE

# Jones Beach's first female lifeguards mark 50th anniversary

The hiring of the young women in 1968 was a milestone for the world-famous park on Long Island.



They started as lifeguards in 1968, the first women hired for Jones Beach. This summer they celebrated a 50th reunion, from left, Barbara Jane Graham, of Massapequa; Diane Nicola, of Leland, North Carolina; Eileen Blomquist, of Long Beach; and Evon Allen, of Amityville. Photo Credit: Barry Sloan

**By John Hanc**

Special to Newsday

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When West Islip High School swimming coach Chuck Brown heard about the tryout for female lifeguards at Jones Beach, he immediately signed up his daughter, Nanette. At 16, she was one of the top competitive swimmers on Long Island in 1968.

“He said, basically, ‘You’re going,’” recalled Nanette Brown Habershaw, now 66 and a grandmother living in Hingham, Massachusetts.

To qualify, they had to pass the same test as the male guards: a distance swim of about 400 yards to gauge endurance; a 100-yard swim to test speed; and “breaks and carries” tests to demonstrate the ability to haul a distressed swimmer and to break a panicked swimmer’s hold.

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Nanette Brown Habershaw, of Hingham, Massachusetts, left, greets Barbara Jane Graham, of Massapequa, during a 50th reunion of the first generation of female lifeguards at Jones

Though an elite, male — and proudly macho — lifeguard unit may have kept watch over Jones Beach since it



Beach State Park in Wantagh. Photo Credit: Barry Sloan

opened in 1929, Habershaw said she was unfazed at the prospect of lining up with the guys.

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“I’d been swimming since I was 4 years old,” she said. “We lived on a canal in West Islip, so we were, like, in the water all the time.”

Habershaw was among 11 of the 150 young women, many experienced swimmers who had competed against one another in Amateur Athletic Union meets, who passed the test to become the first women in the Jones Beach Lifeguard Corps.

“My dad was so proud,” she recalled. “He was telling everybody.”

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In June, Habershaw and five others from the Class of '68 met for a 50th anniversary celebration at The Landing, the new eatery at the West Bathhouse. Over mugs of draft beer and glasses of wine, the older lifeguards, some looking fit enough to respond to an emergency whistle that afternoon, laughed, hugged

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and reminisced about their lives and exploits during long-ago summers.

The crowd of about 100 also included female lifeguards from the 1970s, 1980s and into the 2000s — along with male guards there for the transition.

Among the latter was Dave Spence, 76, a guard for nine years when the first women were hired. Spence said that while he and many other male guards accepted the women, some older members did not.

— “There were the ‘How are they going to do this?’ guys,” recalled Spence, of Babylon. “There were the ‘It’s a man’s game’ guys. Over time, the women proved all the Luddites wrong.”

And while towns, villages and private pools on the Island had begun employing female lifeguards as early as World War II in the early 1940s, their presence at world-famous Jones Beach was a milestone. The women in the Class of '68, the oldest of whom was 20, were hired in part to staff the new East Bathhouse pool. It would be another nine years before they worked at the park's oceanfront beaches.

“We really were breaking ground,” Habershaw said. “But we were young, and we weren't aware of women's lib at that point.”

In large part these were teenage girls from the suburbs less interested in making history than in spending a summer at the beach — and getting paid for it.

“It was my first real job,” said Eileen McGrain Blomquist, 66, who grew up in Westbury and lives in Long Beach. “They were paying good money at the time, two dollars and fifty cents an hour. I could take the bus to Roosevelt Field and buy some new outfits with that money.”

For some of the Class of '68, lifeguarding became a way of life. Evon Allen, 67, worked until 2011 at Jones Beach and later Robert Moses State Park. In 1993, she became the first woman to rise to the top rank of captain.

Allen, of Amityville, remembers beachgoers who weren't pleased at seeing the female guards. One

woman scolded her: “She said, ‘How dare you take a job from somebody that has to support their family.’ ”

And there were the disrespectful antics. One day that first season, Habershaw said a group of young men visiting the pool pushed her into the water, then took off running toward the nearby tunnel to the beach at Field 5. “I got out of the water, hopped a fence and then jumped down 10 feet to cut them off at the tunnel,” Habershaw recalled. “They had no idea a girl could do that.”

She blew four whistles (the emergency signal) “and the cops were there in a second.” Asked whether she wanted to press charges, Habershaw declined. “I think they learned a lesson that day,” she recalled, with a laugh.

Sexist attitudes remained nearly a decade later when women were finally allowed to guard the beaches.

Nancy Lynch Hoffman, of Bay Shore, was in the first group of women to pass the new, tougher test for the ocean beaches. Hoffman, now 61, recalls that when she politely thanked a lieutenant for letting her join his oceanfront crew, he replied, “ ‘I had no choice. I had to let you work here.’ ”

But by the end of that first summer, 1977, she had earned his respect. “We were better than a lot of the male swimmers,” Hoffman recalled at the reunion.

According to the state’s Office of Parks, Recreation and Historic Preservation, there are 74 women among the 492 lifeguards at its Long Island beaches this summer — a minority, but hardly a rarity.

“Now we have plenty of women officers on ocean fields, and the parks department has many women in upper management,” said James Rooney, of Great River, a 40-year Jones Beach lifeguard who is also the corps’ archivist and a reunion co-organizer. “Things are running fine.”

One of the younger women who attended the reunion, Corinne Peters Dictor, 42, said she appreciated the societal currents her predecessors had to battle.

“Changing social norms is a slow and gradual process,” said Dictor, a Jones Beach lifeguard in the 1990s and early 2000s who now lives in Jensen Beach, Florida. “These women had the bravery to

deal with the naysayers.”

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