



Meet Mrs. Fab

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by Suzanne Thompson

Take a stroll along Ocean Beach Park and chances are you'll run into her. To many local school kids, she's "Mrs. Fab."

Born and raised in New London, Louise Fabrykiewicz loves her beach. She is committed to making it a part of the educational experience for students of all ages.



Louise Fabrykiewicz, organizer of Save Ocean Beach works with volunteers as they clean trash along the walking trails at Ocean Beach Park.

Purchased by the City of New London in 1893, the 50-acre park draws 500,000 people a year. For some, it's white sand and sun, others come for the Olympic size swimming pool, water slide, spray park, carousel, or miniature golf. Some remember the miniature train that ran between the nature areas and parking lot, or Dodg'em and the bumper cars, long gone although the building is still there.

Located on the city's southernmost shoreline, the beach is bordered by the Thames River on the east and Alewife Cove Tidal Creek on the northern and western borders. Long Island Sound laps the southern beach and the Atlantic Ocean is straight ahead.

"You can see 11 different coastal habitats from one spot," says Fabrykiewicz. "You can't do any better in the entire state of Connecticut."



Louise Fabrykiewicz and her volunteers care for Ocean Beach

She joined Save the Beach (SOB), a grassroots organization formed about 13 years ago to save one of the few city-owned, public access beaches in the state. Establishing a nature walk was one of the group's first priorities, along with restoring an observation deck. As the Ocean Beach Park Alewife Cove Nature Walk took shape, Fabrykiewicz developed a companion environmental educational program that reinforces the need to clean up the beaches and restore, protect, and maintain fragile beach habitats for future generations.

"The beach was in pretty bad shape when we got started," Fabrykiewicz said.

Inspired by the lectures of William Niering, Connecticut College environmental sciences professor, pioneer in conservation ecology, and restoration ecology and internationally known wetlands expert, she calls the program "A Living Museum." Niering passed away in 1999, and Fabrykiewicz dedicated it in his honor.

A Living Museum's purpose is to enhance children's awareness of the natural world around them, to relate to, appreciate, and feel the need to care for the coastal region. "Dr. Niering said 'natural areas are living museums-exhibits of the plant, animal, and mineral world. Each is a showcase, different from every other just as are the world's greatest works of art,'" she said. Fabrykiewicz wrote a detailed beach guide for volunteers, describing the beach habitats, flora, and fauna. She also compiled a comprehensive teacher's guide, full of activities for third-grade classes.

Each May, about 250 New London and Groton public school third graders participate in "A Beach Experience," a field trip that puts them up close and personal with the beach's crustaceans, fish, birds, and plants. They also see how much trash ends up on the beach, from plastic bottles and bags to cigarette butts. A handful of volunteers, many of them older than 79-year-old Fabrykiewicz, guide the tours.

The students capture their experiences and thoughts in "My Beach Journal," a workbook Fabrykiewicz created. Nature is not presented in isolation; some history, culture, songs, and poetry are woven in, and there's a strong anti-litter message, too.

"Bottom line, you've got to connect to the nature before you want to take care of it," she said. "That's why we bring the kids to the beach."

Conn College's Office of Volunteers for Community Service (OVCS) is a partner, providing production support of program literature. While Jessica LeClair, a 2008 alumni and AmeriCorps VISTA staff member, provides hands-on support at the beach outings, Fabrykiewicz says OVCS staff help with beach clean-up and weed pulling. The nature walk continues to be a work in progress. Waterford High School junior Calvin Dedrick plans to do an invasive weed clean-up project for his Eagle Scout badge. The beach experience is part of a larger vision and dream that Fabrykiewicz shares with Tom Quintin, current SOB chairman, and others.

"The vision is to utilize the Dodg'em building, turned over to Save Ocean Beach, as a gathering place to encourage environmental, civic, and other groups," she said. "New London Public Schools could see it as a satellite classroom."

That will require architectural design assistance and Fabrykiewicz hopes it would utilize green technologies. There also are plans to develop a walk along the banks of the tidal creek, where the miniature train ran, connecting it to a garden gateway area next to the parking lot. She estimates it would cost about \$43,000.

Fabrykiewicz, also the environmental education chair for the local Sierra Club chapter, networks with area educators through the New London Environmental Educators Coalition. The group brings together teachers at all levels and "nonformal environmental educators," interested individuals, and representatives of area colleges, museums, and other institutions.

For more information, see www.ocean-beach-park.com, <http://ovcs.conncoll.edu>, or www.newlondon.org/html/BEEP/EEC.htm.