

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.