

# PITA NEWS LETTER

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Summer 2018 Issue 2

## SHEILA RUSSO: PI LOSES AN ISLAND MAINSTAY

by Dirk Messelaar, PITA

"Do you know the movie 'On Golden Pond'?" Dr. Russo asked me quietly as he lifted his black-framed glasses onto his forehead. "Well, this Plum Island cottage was our Golden Pond," he continued as his eyes filled with tears, "a place where we could be ourselves with our family and leave our busy lives behind." It was apparent that Vince was still raw from his wife Sheila's accidental death a few weeks ago. And they would not be celebrating 55 years of happy marriage this June.

Sheila Russo, a nurse and homemaker, and her husband Vince, a well-known local surgeon, had spent their summers in a small, beach-front summer cottage on Northern Boulevard since 1973 when they were in their early 30's. Married in 1963, they lived in Newburyport in a house within walking distance of Anna Jacques Hospital where Vince practiced. In the 1970's, many of the other doctors and colleagues had summer houses on Cape Cod. But Sheila and Vince shuddered at the thought of the long commute to a summer retreat, and also realized that Plum Island offered a much quieter refuge. They bought the three-bedroom, unheated cottage and began a journey on "Golden Pond" with their four children and fifteen grandchildren.

In the first few years at the PI cottage, they began to notice all of the broken glass, especially broken bottles, on the beach in front of the cottage. Some of the bottles and glass had been left behind by



Sheila Russo, former PITA treasurer and board member, will be missed.

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- PI BEAUTIFICATION 7PM 1<sup>ST</sup> TUES
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## JANE MCNEAL: ONE OF A DYING BREED OF PLUM ISLAND "CHARACTERS"

by Dirk Messelaar, PITA

When planning to write my first portrait of a PI resident for the PITA newsletter, I asked some Plum Islanders who might be a good subject. Many suggested Jane McNeal would be a good start as she

Sheila Russo continued



THE RECENT RESIDENTS' volunteer cleanup of the Plum Island shoreline was a family affair for the Russos. With their plastic trash bags at the ready are

Mrs. Sheila Russo and children Teresa, Anita, Katrina and Joseph. (Ed Passarella)

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beachgoers and many bottles had washed up on shore after being thrown over board. Sheila and all four of her children began to routinely police the shoreline and pick up the glass. Vince also became acutely aware of the glass shard's danger on PI's beach: ever-increasing first aid and surgery on the cut feet of unsuspecting tourists. Opposed by a local bottling company, Sheila and Vince took a small, but important, role in making the public aware of the environmental and health dangers inherent in the wanton disposal of glass bottles. The Massachusetts Bottle Bill was passed in 1976, and the dramatic decline in the number of glass bottles on our beaches is still apparent today.

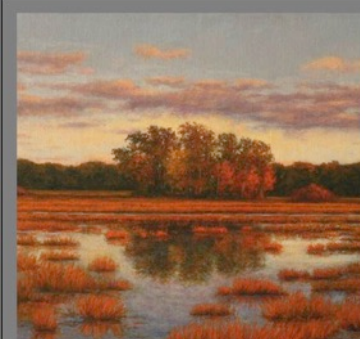
The family's focus on environmental issues resurfaced in subsequent years. Sheila and her husband became strong advocates for municipal water and sewer on Plum Island. They recognized its importance in improving and preserving the island's fragile ecosystem. But, at the same time, they understood that many of the objections came from a few PI residents hoping to buy out frustrated property owners so that those

purchasing could develop larger parcels. In addition, later some of the Russo kids worked for the Youth Conservation Corps, and son Joe worked for the Parker River Refuge.

Sheila's "homemaker" years were sandwiched between her nursing at Boston City Hospital, B.U. Medical Center, and Whittier Rehabilitation Hospital. After 12 years in the field, she became a full-time homemaker for Vince and her four children — Teresa, Joseph, Katrina, and Anita — for the next 24 years. Then, after the kids flew the nest, she returned to work at a rehab hospital. Earning certification as a rehabilitation nurse (CRRN), she became a case manager leading the pulmonary group — retiring in 1999.

It was evident to everyone who met Sheila that she was a highly intelligent, remarkably well organized but humble and

Sheila Russo continued next page



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Sheila Russo continued

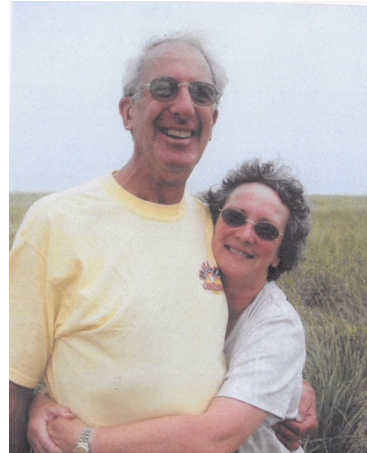
practical person. (Vince is proud to recall that she was, indeed, valedictorian of her high school class.) Before they were married, Vince tried to convince her to attend medical school: she had the temperament, knowledge and judgment of a very good physician. When, independently, I asked her last year if she hadn't gone to medical school because of some gender bias, she said "No, I really didn't want that. I was so happy as a nurse."

Sheila's 24 years as a "homemaker" and many years as a nurse were intertwined with many, many volunteer activities — something many of her friends and acquaintances only realized after she passed away. For example, beginning in the early 1970's, she was a Red Cross blood drive volunteer for 16 years and, during most of those years, served as Treasurer of the Anna Jaques Hospital Aid Association. Also, since 2004, Sheila kept the books and added warmth and common sense to Board meetings as PITA's Treasurer for many of those years.

But the summers at their PI cottage had earned center stage in their rich, family-cantered lives.

As Vince was still working at the hospital, Sheila taught the children how to swim at The Basin. But they had to wait for their father to come home from work before they could jump in. "When's dad coming home?" became a constant refrain. Later, the swimming lessons continued at Newburyport's YWCA. One of Sheila's daughters became a head lifeguard on Newbury Beach. Some days, Sheila could see her daughter in the distance on the beach, guiding the other lifeguards through their training exercises.

Sheila and the children would occasionally use the 16-foot skiff moored in The Basin. Once, she took her four children fishing for flounder in the Merrimack River. They ran out of gas, but floated past some eel fisherman. One of them lifted an eel



Vince and Sheila Russo

toward Sheila's and said "How would you like to have one of these?" — with the double entendre not lost on Sheila. After a little chuckle, the wise-guys towed Sheila's boat back to The Basin. The family had 12 lobster pots for a few years, and although they caught only a few, Sheila always enjoyed preparing the local delicacy for others. In other years, the family sailed a 20-foot Lightning at the American Yacht Club, but Sheila especially enjoyed watching the four children, with Joe at the helm, race informally against other Lightning class sailboats.

The family watched as Harry O's island parades walked by their cottage. The kids would ask the parents for \$1 for cotton candy, but Vince would tease them and give them only 25 cents. "What happened," Vince asked the kids, "when you offered only 25 cents?" The four children replied together with glee "We got the same cotton candy as the other kids."

Sheila encouraged her children to take on various jobs on the island. As the girls got older, they began babysitting for neighbors and family friends on Plum Island. Sheila provided the guidance needed for them to become trusted sitters. She used this experience to develop and teach a babysitting

Sheila Russo next page

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Sheila Russo continued

certification program at the Newburyport YWCA. Often Sheila walked the family's golden retriever Rusty on the beach (when that was permitted), or along Northern Boulevard. Or she would tend to her garden of wild flowers in the many containers in front of the cottage.

The Russo's cottage was near the island's Catholic Church St. James Mission (before the church was closed about 15 years ago). As practicing Catholics, Sheila and her family were actively — and passively — involved in church activities. The Russo's attended either Saturday or Sunday Mass and befriended many of the priests there over the years, including Father Leonard and Father Sears. The Russo girls were regular "readers" during Masses. Some of her children would become attendants at the church's parking lot. And Sheila even made curtains for the confessional upon Father Sears' request. But the family was also passively engaged with the nearby church. Dr. Russo once told Father Leonard, "It's so nice that I can often hear your homily from across the street when the church windows are open." Father Leonard quickly replied with a wry smirk, "Then I would expect to see the contribution envelope full when it's passed forward!"

Sheila Russo was a patient, kind, practical, intelligent hardworking mother, wife, grandmother, nurse, and community volunteer who will be missed.



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## MRBA REPORT: PLUM ISLAND

**DREDGE?** -- By John Macone The island may get its own waterborne solution to the problems caused by shifting sands.

The Merrimack River Beach Alliance has been discussing the possibility to getting a sand dredge for the island. These kinds of vessels are extensively used all along the East Coast to maintain navigation channels, and to move sand to areas where erosion is rampant.

In Massachusetts, Cape Cod has been using a dredge with great success for decades, and recently purchased a second vessel to add more capacity to its fleet. The new generation of dredges utilize computer technology and advanced mechanical dredging techniques to improve efficiency and accuracy.

On Plum Island, a dredge could potentially be used to keep a navigation channel open through "The Bar," the massive sandbar just beyond the jetties. Ideally, the Army Corps of Engineers seeks to dredge The Bar about every 3-5 years, but funding has been a problem. It could also be used in other areas where sand is collecting. Dredges are capable of depositing sand to areas where erosion is occurring. For Plum Island, that could potentially mean that sand could be dumped near the erosion hotspot at the northern end of the island.



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Jane McNeal Continued from page 1

was truly a Plum Island “character.” So, I expected to meet someone who meets the dictionary definition of a character: someone who is unusual or eccentric. And she might fit that definition a little, but she mostly meets another definition of “character”: someone with moral quality or integrity. Under trying circumstances, Jane has given her life to unselfishly give of herself to her family and the community, while also living life to its fullest on her own terms.

After her marriage in the early 1970’s, Jane and her new husband, who was in the Air Force, moved to Glasgow, Montana for 1 1/2 years. When her husband was discharged from the service, they moved to Haverhill and bought/managed Estes Market there.

Later, in 1974, Jane and her then husband Phil bought Boulay’s at 134 Northern Boulevard (before that it was called Fred’s Snack Bar) and renamed it PJ’s. (PJ’s was originally named after Phil and Jane, but after the divorce she told everyone it was an abbreviation for “Polish Jane.”) Divorcing in 1977, she was to become the restaurant’s sole owner and manager for the next 27 years — working 7 days a week with Tuesday and Thursday afternoons off. (Jean Geiger, the former owner of the PI hotel Walton’s Ocean Front — later renamed Ocean Blue — bought the store in 2004, intending it to serve as a kitchen for Walton’s.)

“PJ’s wasn’t just a restaurant. It was the island’s kitchen,” Jane emphasizes, “because it was more like a country store, which also served homemade food around a horseshoe counter. In those days, our customers were an extended family who stopped in regularly and who helped each other out, if they could.” If you were sick, the regulars at PJ’s got the word out. And it was not uncommon to have a police officer arrive at your door with soup or food from PJ’s. If someone’s child had forgotten his or her homework, lunch, or musical instrument at PJ’s, a PJ’s customer could be counted on to drop off the misplaced article on the way to work. If a PI resident saw that a child had missed the school bus, someone would give



Formerly PJ’s - Photo by Dirk Messelaar

him or her a ride to school.

But life on Plum Island changed during Jane’s years at PJ’s. She watched the transition of the island from summer cottages to winterized homes as more people started to live in their homes year-round. As property values increased, more of the long-time PI residents sold their properties at a good price. The new wave of home owners started to live on the island year-round — renovating and upgrading their properties. Gone were the winter rentals that were so prevalent in the 60’s and 70’s. The new owners did not rent their homes in the winter, content to use their PI home only as a vacation retreat. The addition of municipal water and sewer only accelerated the gentrification of the island as houses grew larger with more amenities. Gone were the “shacks” and cottages, even though some still remain as poignant reminders of PI’s increasingly lost past.

Jane was a single mom who had to raise her four young children — Therese, Sean, Melissa, and Scott — by herself. Three of the children grew up to have

Jane McNeal continued next page

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Jane McNeal Continued

very successful personal lives and careers — and they live nearby.

But Sean had a somewhat remarkable, but sad, story. He was a gifted artist who, as a student at Triton, won a Boston Globe art award for his inspired, graphic map of Plum Island as it was 1988. Later, he enrolled in Mass College of Art in Boston and Parsons School of Design in New York City. In 1996, Sean assisted in the sculpting of a 24-foot high statue called "Gymnast" (with well-known designer Richard MacDonald from Laguna, California) for the US Olympic Committee. The 24-foot statue stands outside the Olympic Village in Atlanta, Georgia; the 2-foot model of the Olympic statue stands on a table in Jane's Plum Island living room. Soon thereafter, at the age of 26, Sean died in an accident riding his new motorcycle.

Jane is well known around Greater Newburyport for all of her volunteer work. In the 1960's, she served as a counselor for Sea Haven Camp on Plum Island (which, as an aside, had been built on the former Knobb's Beach Coast Guard Station in 1946) where she helped the children coping with polio. Since 2005, she has been an usher at the Firehouse Center for the Performing Arts. For years, she has made and served fish chowder at Lowell Boat Shop's annual Christmas

festivities, and various soups at the Bellevue church. She makes and serves breakfast once a month at the Elk's Club. In addition to this volunteering, she works at Plum Island Soap assembling "Man Cans" and other products. For the last 8 years, Jane has also driven seniors in her own car for the elderly transport service to medical appointments. But the volunteer work that really seems to light her fire is when she serves as a guide for professional performers in July at the Lowell Folk Festival.

In 2001, one of Jane's PI neighbors introduced her to Cheryl Cormier, an acclaimed Cajun dance star (inducted into the Louisiana Dance Hall of Fame). With Cheryl as motivation, Jane began dancing to country music at the Marte Lounge in Salisbury. Then she graduated to dancing in Louisiana: since 2005, she has been traveling to Lafayette, Louisiana two to four times each year, dancing to Cajun and zydeco rhythms.

"Plum Island has changed so much since I moved here in 1974," Jane continues as we sit in her cottage behind the former PJ's. "We have so many more full-time affluent residents now — many of them having upgraded a summer cottage



**Plum Island Beautification  
meetings, the 1st Tuesday of the  
month**

All are welcome to PI Beautification meetings, the 1st Tuesday of the month at PITA hall at 7:00.

Any questions or ideas please email Lynne Petty at [lynneplumisland@gmail.com](mailto:lynneplumisland@gmail.com)

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Jane McNeal Continued

into a full-time residence. From 1974 to 2004, when I owned PJ's, the relatively small number of full-time residents developed into a strong circle of trusted friends." The PI core included Kay at Surfand, Danny at Mr. Moe's, Cowboy Tom, Joyce Machines (Angie's wife), Mary Keezer, Father Sears, Mrs. White (Old Point Road), Bobby Albrecht, and KJ (Kenny Sylvester) — and many more. The PI core would see each other routinely at Dick's, Porgy's (Mad Martha's predecessor), 4 C's, Plum Island Grille, Angie's, Surfand, and Mr. Moe's.

"But, maybe the leader of the pack that made things happen was Harry O," says Jane. According to her, Harry O'Connor organized annual Plum Island parades in the 70's and 80's. The annual St. Patrick's Day parade would begin with corn beef and cabbage at Harry's home on the Point. Then, the "parade" — consisting of whoever wanted to walk along — would meander down Northern Boulevard. The centerpiece of the parade was the "queen" of the parade who would ride in the back of a dump truck. The queen was chosen after a "talent contest" displaying a wide range of singing and dancing acumen at the Beachcoma. The "queen" was named something different every year: for example, Miss Shipwreck, Miss Lobsta Pot, or Miss Dune Grass.

The Plum Island Fire Department, with a firehouse formerly at the Point, organized well-attended annual block parties. The block party was always the week after Labor Day weekend at the fire station. With the Lazy J Playboys typically providing the entertainment, the party raised about \$5,000 in its first year to help George Kramer, a volunteer fireman and local plumber, pay his hospital bills after a serious illness. Both the parade and block party stopped from what Jane calls "politics and permits."

Another "unusual" interest that adds to Jane's "resume" as a PI character: she earned her pilot's license in 1987 and started a petition at PJ's that helped save the PI Airport. Until 2010, she's piloted a Cessna 172 for 30 years mostly to Keene NH, Augusta ME, and Martha's Vineyard. Her longest trip as the pilot was the 300-mile trip required to qualify for her pilot's license. In the 80's or 90's, the Little family donated land on and around the airport to the Society for the Preservation of NE Antiquities in memory of

the family's 200th reunion. In turn SPNEA donated land around the PI Airport given to the Parker River Refuge, and they wanted to close the airport. Jane started a petition on PJ's counter that garnered about 5,000 signatures. The petition caught the attention of the Daily News and, subsequently, influential private citizens saved the airport from extinction.

Jane ends her story saying, "I've always loved Plum Island and its people." Here she pauses for emphasis and continues saying, "But, to be honest, Plum Island will never again be like that time when I owned PJ's. It will never again be the same extraordinary place with so many special people in a bygone era."



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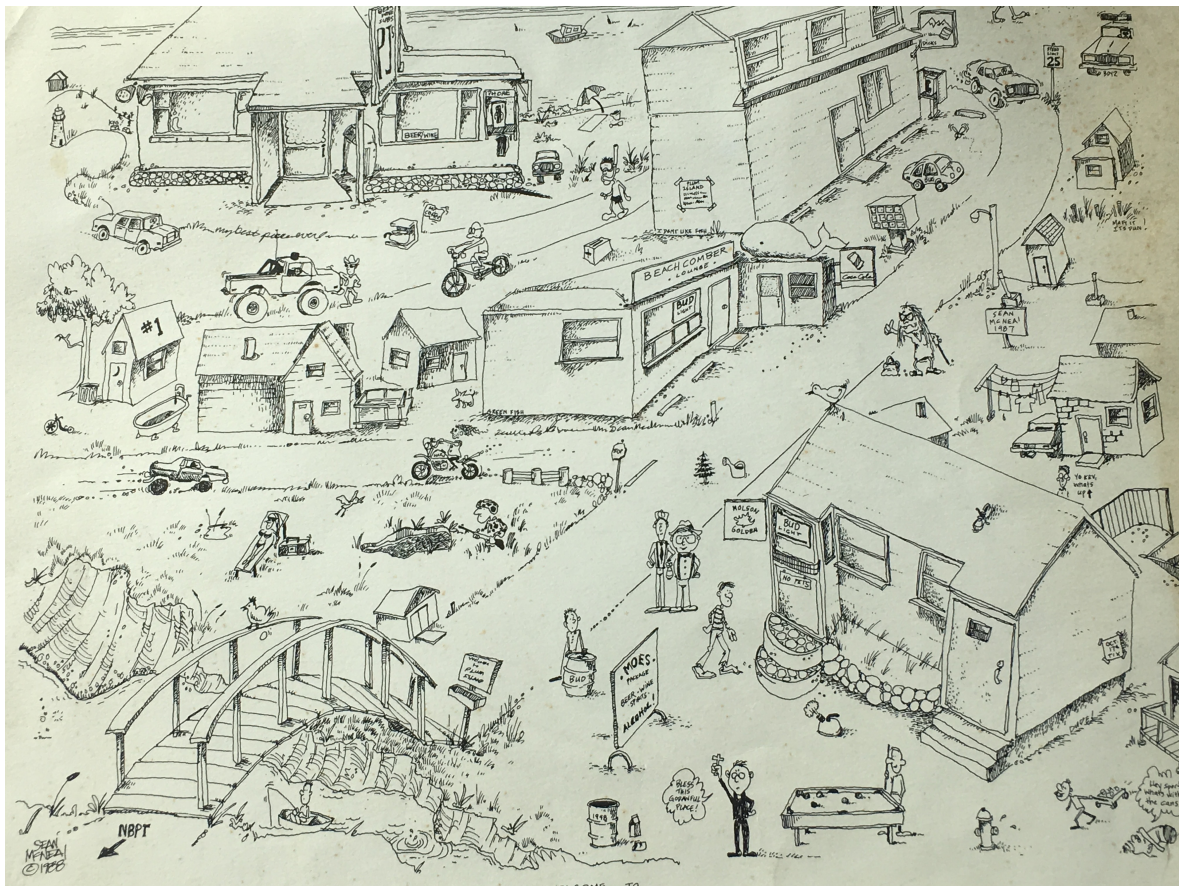
Weekend Rates	
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PI Resident Non-Member	\$375
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Commercial	\$550
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PITA

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Sean McNeal's inspired, graphic map of Plum Island as it was 1988