

# Swimming to Help Protect Local Waters

By Helena Touhey

Ben Tuff is preparing to swim around Conanicut Island, an activity that is partly about personal records and largely about raising money to ensure the protection of local waterways.

While the swim is a bucket-list item, it's also an effort to raise \$50,000 for Clean Ocean Access, a Middletown-based nonprofit with a focus on eliminating marine debris, improving coastal water quality, and preserving and protecting public shoreline access. Tuff said he wants "to give back to what gives back to me, which is the bay."

Tuff will undertake "Swim Jamestown" on Aug. 5 or Aug. 6, depending on weather conditions. At around 5:30 a.m., he will set off from Horsehead, south of Fort Wetherill, traveling clockwise around the island and returning about eight hours later, having completed a nearly 23-mile loop.

Along the way, Tuff, 39, will be shadowed by a friend on a paddleboard, as well as two boats, which will be farther off so as not to affect the water currents. He'll pause occasionally to hydrate and take in energy snacks.

"No matter what we do, it's going to be kind of thinking on our feet ... as we go around," he said. "Depending on the tides, and depending on the wind, will also [determine] the course. I know where I need to be for every hour of the swim."

Tuff worked with a local sailor to chart his course, and has mapped out what areas to avoid and where to gravitate toward depending on conditions. "I just want to get from Kettle Bottom all the way around to Kettle Bottom. That's it," he said.

Along the way he'll be visible from shore. "We'll have people cheering him on and doing little cleanups around the island the whole day, so everyone's a winner and everyone can cheer him on," said Dave McLaughlin, COA's executive director.



Ben Tuff, front and center, is pictured with family members on Sunday July 21 after completing a practice swim in preparation for Swim Jamestown, a fundraising event to raise money for Clean Ocean Access. (Photos by Grace Trofa)



Ben Tuff emerges smiling after a practice swim in Jamestown on Sunday, for which he departed from Green's Pier, at 5:30 a.m., returning nearly 8 hours later, all in preparation for the Swim Jamestown event Aug. 5.

Tuff first connected with COA during its Swim to Skim event last summer, a 1.2-mile swim in Newport Harbor that raises awareness for COA's efforts to eliminate marine debris and improve the water quality around Aquidneck Island. That event will take place again this summer on Aug. 25, when participants will swim from Perrotti Park

to King Park.

"When you have a grassroots organization like Clean Ocean Access paving the way, it should be a no brainer that you give back," Tuff said. "They do a great job of making sure every penny is accounted for and spent productively, and they actually get things done which, to me, is the best part."

Prior to Swim to Skim last year,

Tuff participated in several Save The Bay Swims, which cross Narragansett Bay from Newport to Jamestown. Before that, he competed in triathlons, which introduced him to open water swimming. The idea for Swim Jamestown was also inspired by a 12.5-mile swim that he participated in off Key West, Florida, which was organized as part of the Global Swim Series.

Although Tuff lives with his wife and two children in Connecticut, where he works as director of admission at Rumsey Hull School, he has long considered Conanicut Island home. Growing up, his

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– Ben Tuff

family moved around a lot, and every summer they would visit his grandparents in Jamestown, making it the one place that felt like a consistent home, and beginning a tradition that continues to this day.

He recalled crabbing off Green's Pier with his brother, and finding used syringes all around the beach at a time when no one seemed to be worried about water quality, let alone plastics polluting the ocean. He's grateful to organizations like Clean Ocean Access that are working to improve water quality so future generations can continue to crab and swim in the same waters that have long been an important part of his own life.

"The youth are the ones who are taking great pride in keeping our environment clean," Tuff said. "They are the ones who are yelling at their parents for getting a plastic bag at CVS or for not recycling an aluminum can. They are our future."

His own kids think he's a bit crazy, he said, but they are supportive.

"They think it's really cool," he said. "They have a mom who is really going for it in Ironman triathlons, and they have a dad who just loves to swim and contribute to a better ocean and a place that they love so much."

As of press time, Tuff and COA had raised more than half of their goal of \$50,000.

Following Tuff's swim, Clean Ocean Access is planning a celebration in the downtown area of Jamestown.

For details on that gathering, and updates on Tuff's swim the day of the event, follow COA on social media. For more information about COA or to make a donation in support of Swim Jamestown, visit [cleanoceanaccess.org](http://cleanoceanaccess.org).

## STOP Grant for Middletown

The Middletown Prevention Coalition (MPC) announces that it has been awarded a Sober Truth on Preventing Underage Drinking (STOP) Grant in the amount of \$48,500 over the next four years. The MPC was the only recipient in Rhode Island and one of only four STOP grants awarded across New England from the 22 grants awarded nationally.

The grant is from the Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration and has a goal of preventing and reducing alcohol use among youth and young adults ages 12 to 20 years. The STOP grant will complement the coalition's federal Drug Free Communities Support Program grant.

The MPC is a community-based coalition comprised of individuals representing various public and private sectors of the Middletown community, operating within the Town of Middletown's boards, commissions and committees organizational structure.

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