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07.05.2023 FEATURED STORY

Shelter Island Bay Constables on patrol: Keeping Islanders and visitors safe on the water

By David Brush



Marine Patrol Officers Butch Labrozzi, left, and Beau Payne moving through West Neck Harbor on patrol on Saturday, July 1. (Credit: David Brush)

Whether it's saving lives on the water putting out boat fires, or evicting raccoons from ship cabins Marine Patrol Officers Beau Payne and Butch Labrozzi do whatever it takes to keep Shelter Island's waters safe.

While every day doesn't involve life-saving, marine patrol officers, also known as Bay Constables, are responsible for the safety of every boater around Shelter Island.

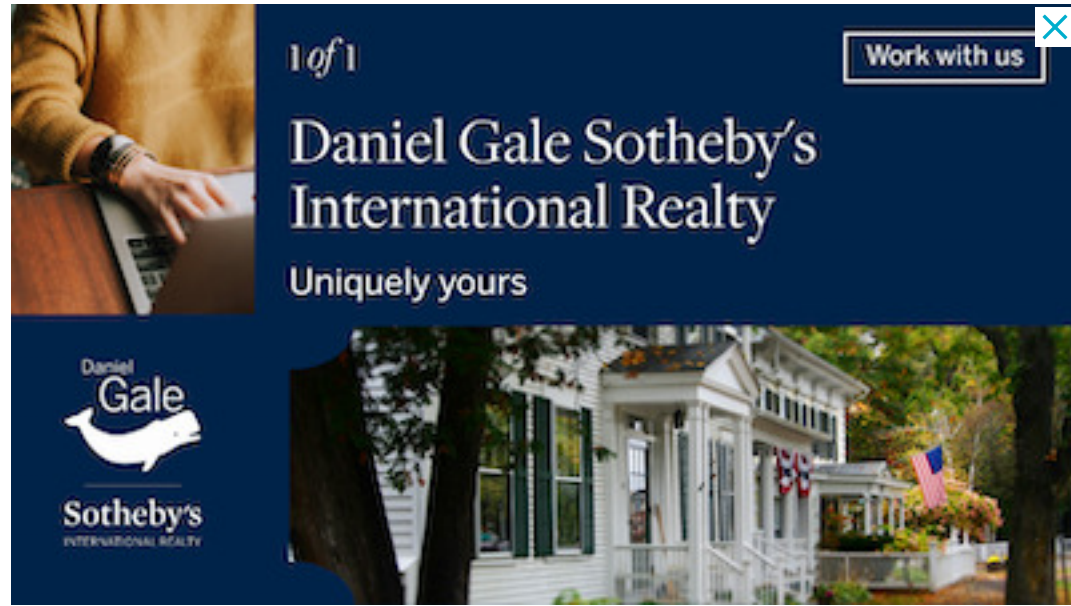
The Reporter went along for a patrol with the officers recently on a sunny, slightly hazy morning. Officer Labrozzi guided the Police Department's Boston Whaler through the smooth waters of Dering Harbor. Officer Payne leaned out from the starboard side of the boat, looking for anything that might require police intervention.

Although not yet in the middle of what would be a long day, both men showed positive anticipation for the day ahead. "We're both boat guys," Officer Payne said, before pointing to a vessel that was slowly pulling into the harbor.

Officer Labrozzi spun the wheel and, drawing closer, explained that they were pulling over an unregistered boat. Following a brief interaction with the owner, Officer Payne mentioned that the boat was only documented with the Coast Guard and lacked state registration.

This was apparent since there were no stickers on the boat's stern. These stickers would have been brightly colored with a number on them that corresponds to the year in which the registration expires.

Officer Payne described the issue saying, "I always bring it back to the license plate analogy. You wouldn't drive your car without one."



Since the owner's boat was relatively new, Officer Payne let him off with instructions and a warning. "We just want compliance," he said, explaining that ensuring safety and assisting the public, not punishment, is the purpose of his job.

Officer Labrozzi used his radio to verbally file the incident with dispatch before pressing the throttle and heading for Coecl's Harbor.

Officers Labrozzi and Payne work full-time throughout the year. As members of the Shelter Island Police Department, they have jurisdiction on land, but spend the lion's share of their time on the water.

Nearing Coecl's Harbor, Officer Payne noticed a tent on Reel Point, and asked Officer Labrozzi to get closer to the sand. Officer Payne waved at the tent's owners and made them aware of the no camping rule on Shelter Island beaches.

He then recommended alternative sources of shade, such as beach umbrellas that they could use, wished them a happy Fourth of July, and let them get back to their activities.

A few minutes after the beach incident, Office Labrozzi pointed toward a boat that looked too crowded for its size. Officer Payne, using a pair of binoculars, counted nine people and agreed it should be stopped.

The boat in question was completely out of the harbor so Officer Labrozzi cranked the steering wheel, gradually increasing speed. Brief siren bursts got the overloaded boat to pull over, at which point Officer Payne confirmed that its limit was seven occupants.

Officer Payne asked the captain to return to the dock he had come from, and then proceeded to escort him back into the harbor. On the way, Officer Payne saw three kids leaning over the bow of a moving boat.



Pointing, he yelled, "Those kids, sit down." The adults on board immediately pulled the little ones into seats, and waved their appreciation.

At the overloaded boat's dock, Officer Payne did his usual safety inspection while cracking jokes with the kids on board. He ended up letting the captain off with a warning, since he had been polite, compliant, and had clearly made efforts to drive safely on the way back.

"I've seen boats go down quickly," Officer Labrozzi said, pulling away from the dock.

"We want to stop potentially dangerous situations from actually becoming dangerous," added Officer Payne.

Suddenly, a call came through the radio about a dead engine near Crescent Beach. A boat was drifting uncontrollably through crowded water and needed immediate assistance. "Hold on," said Officer Labrozzi, pumping the throttle. The water beyond Coecl's Harbor was now choppy, as traffic had been steadily increasing throughout the day.

As members of the Police Department, marine patrol officers hear every nearby call, from Shelter Island all the way to the Hamptons. Upon reaching the dysfunctional boat, it was already being towed by Officer John Mahoney, the other marine patrol officer on duty.

Blue lights flashed on the top of his boat as he guided a stranded couple to safety. With the incident under control, Officer Labrozzi said that he wanted to check out West Neck Harbor, which typically gets crowded on weekends.

On the way, Officer Labrozzi voiced his gratitude about the dead engine not leading to a crash. When asked why he chose policing as his line of work, Officer Labrozzi said, "It feels good to help people."



Officer Payne nodded in agreement.

In West Neck Harbor, they spent time monitoring restricted areas and looking for boats that were anchored beyond their legal zones. Only one boat was fully breaking this rule, so Officer Labrozzi pulled beside it and Officer Payne spoke to the captain, informing him of the buoys that mark legal anchoring areas.

Before pulling away, Officer Payne also gave the captain a "Boaters' Guide" pamphlet, which is produced by the town and shows where boats not registered on Shelter Island can anchor.

The smell of a nearby barbecue filled the air. With no calls coming through the radio, Officer Labrozzi opened a pack of sunflower seeds. Splitting their shells open with his teeth, he then swallowed each kernel and spat out what remained.

Officer Payne, with a confused glance, said that he swallows his sunflower seeds whole. A brief debate led to the conclusion that consuming the shells should theoretically make one's stomach tougher, while spitting them out is the proper way to eat sunflower seeds.

There were approximately 30 boats in the harbor at this point, and everybody was clearly enjoying the holiday weekend. Officer Labrozzi, pleased with the scene, began to speak about his childhood on the water, and the 27 years he has spent as a marine patrol officer.

"I just love being on the water," he said, still scanning the harbor for potential signs of distress. Officer Payne agreed, saying, "The water is all about freedom and having a good time, so we want to keep it that way."

David Brush

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