



Ponquogue Bridge

BUILDING A LEGACY with New York City's Harbor School

By Michael Salvatorezza & Christopher P. Weaver
Photos courtesy Eco-Photo Explorers

Although the sun was shining, a stiff breeze blowing from the west was quickly building to a cold wind with gusts over 40 MPH and the water on Long Island's Shinnecock Bay was beginning to roil with whitecaps and decreasing visibility on a building tide.

And yet, the enthusiasm of the divers gearing up at the Ponquogue Bridge, one of the premier dive sites on Long Island, was palpable and undiminished. On this late October afternoon 22 students from the Urban Assembly New York Harbor School, located on New York City's Governor's Island, had travelled east to Long Island to dive with divers from the Long Island Dive Association (LIDA), and a little adverse weather was not about to dampen anyone's spirits!

The Harbor School is one of 581 high schools in New York City, but it is arguably one of the most distinctive. In addition to the traditional curriculum common to all schools in the city, the Harbor School offers specialized studies in various marine fields: ocean engineering, marine systems technology, vessel operations, marine biology research, aquaculture, and scientific diving. Tenth grade scientific diving students learn to scuba dive, and all graduates from the school are well positioned for further education in these fields or entry-level jobs in a wide variety of capacities. It is the only public high school in the United States that offers a scientific diving program recognized by the American Academy of Underwater Sciences.



Students get ready to dive

LONG ISLAND DIVERS ASSOCIATION

LIDA is a not-for-profit regional organization dedicated to the promotion of local diving and is staffed completely by volunteers.



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Long Island Diving Association (LIDA)

LIDA is a not-for-profit regional organization dedicated to the promotion of local diving on Long Island, New York, the representation of divers' interests throughout the diving and general community, and the protection of divers' rights through outreach to local and regional government officials.

The primary mission of LIDA is summarized as:

- Establishing, protecting, and expanding access to dive sites and opportunities for all Divers (scuba divers, free divers, snorkelers and spear-fishers) on Long Island and in the Greater New York Metropolitan Area.
- Encouraging active and frequent use by Divers of the unparalleled opportunities presented by the local waters, shipwrecks, reefs and beaches.
- Serving as a liaison between Divers and local, state and federal agencies to protect Divers interests and rights.
- Providing educational opportunities regarding constructive use and preservation of the marine resources and environment.
- Facilitating communications and fostering cooperative relations among clubs, boats, instructors, shops and all serving the dive community.
- Promoting sound safety practices for Divers and dive related activities.
- Encouraging active and safe participation in dive activities by youthful Divers.
- Sponsoring Educational Seminars on matters of interest to the Dive Community.
- Providing a forum for exchange of ideas and innovations among Divers.
- Being a "Voice for Divers" in all matters.



Harbor School student divers

So what makes Harbor School unique?

Well, some of the school's educational principles and core values tell the story:

All students have the desire and intellect to reach their highest academic standards when given the right opportunities and clear expectations, Hands-on, inquiry-based learning in a natural environment stimulates curiosity, critical thinking, and vision – all of which help to improve student outcomes. College should be a real option for all students; the environment should be left better than it's found; a school is only as successful as its students.

The students generally dive around Governor's Island and the Jamaica Bay National Wildlife Refuge – sites not usually known for great visibility or abundant marine life. The opportunity to dive Ponquogue Bridge, a favorite of local divers because of its healthy eco-system and clear water, represented an exciting chance for the student divers to experience local waters from an entirely different perspective.

The idea for this unique sponsorship by LIDA came from a chance meeting between LIDA President Barry Lipsky and school faculty member Joe Gessert during Beneath the Sea's "Beyond the Sea" Kaiser Park beach clean-up and water celebration on Coney Island, New York shortly before Hurricane Sandy struck the area in 2012. The Harbor School and two other BTS scholarship recipients were at the Marine Careers and Education section to provide environmental information and robotic demonstrations to the general public. After learning more about the mission of the Harbor School, which is to provide a college-preparatory education built upon New York City's maritime experience that instills in students the ethic of environmental stewardship and the skills associated with careers on the water, Lipsky and LIDA worked to secure the location, date, and logistics for the event.

Students and LIDA divers entering the water





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Students find an encrusted 1950s era handgun

Students searching for marine life

For the dive, students were paired with a local diver from LIDA who was familiar with the site and at the time of high slack tide the dive teams entered the water with eager anticipation. Although the rough weather decreased visibility and made the dive a challenge, many of the students shrugged it off: the conditions were not too different than what they were used to. Many of the students returned to shore afterwards gushing about having made it to the bridge and below, and were fascinated with the marine life they saw. The students were thrilled to see sightings of crabs, starfish, and other marine organisms, which many local divers take for granted. One buddy team returned with a heavily encrusted 1950s-era handgun found below the bridge. All teams returned with smiles and a deeper appreciation for the marine world only a few miles from their school.

After a sumptuous post-dive barbeque, the students packed their gear, expressed their appreciation to the LIDA divers, and before long their chartered bus departed back to the city. On board were 22 incredibly special students who carried with them the memory of a unique experience: one that will undoubtedly last for many years to come.

The sponsored dive is emblematic of the work of LIDA, a not-for-profit organization with a mission of advocating for diver interests on Long Island. Providing the students from the Harbor School with access to one of the best dive sites in the entire region was the driving force behind this unique sponsorship event. Because of economic limitations, the students of the Harbor School rarely have access to diving outside of the waters close to New York City.

The idea is to help build a legacy by introducing young divers to the beauty of the marine world and to help create a sense of stewardship that can last a lifetime. ■

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