

Meet Your Westchester Neighbor: Bob Walters, Director of the Science Barge in Yonkers

A modern-day Huck Finn: Bob Walters and his life on the river.

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Bob Walters, the self-proclaimed “river rat.”

Bob Walters lives in a beat-up old house in Yonkers that’s 139 steps up from the Hudson River by his aging-gait count. Walters, director of the Science Barge, a project by Groundwork Hudson Valley—a floating prototype of sustainable urban farming—has a short commute to work. That’s not why he lives where he does, though. A bargeman by background, the silver-haired Walters, 65, adores the river in the same hard, always forgiving way you love your children; maybe it’s the same way you feel about God.

“To explain the Hudson River...” he begins, then pauses. “Every day is a different thing. Did you ever see those old postcards from the 1900s where a full moon is shining across a river like a searchlight? I thought that kind of thing had to be made up. But in the winter, I’ll wake up in

the middle of the night and look down from the cliffs where I live and see the moonlight cutting the water at such an angle, and, well, you can’t make that up. It’s just there and it kind of does something to you.”

The Science Barge has a fine story in its own right: Engineered seven years ago by Ted Caplow, PhD, to showcase the possibility of insular, sustainable farming in a city, the project grew too expensive and was set to be dismantled in 2008, before Groundwork Hudson Valley purchased all the equipment on deck—the greenhouses, solar wind panels, etc.—for two dollars and had the barge towed from Chelsea Piers in Manhattan up to Yonkers. “We could have bought it for a dollar,” says Walters, “but Yonkers City Council President Chuck Lesnick only had a two-dollar bill in his pocket.” The commercial marine outfit Hughes Marine Firms actually owns the flatboat now and leases it to Groundwork.

“We’re totally off the grid,” Walters says of the barge. “We use rainwater off the greenhouses to make fresh water. We make our own electricity. We’re not connected to the shore. We grow leafy green vegetables from seed to harvest in six weeks.” The 138-foot barge uses hydroponics and no pesticides to grow pampered vegetables under glass, which are then donated to food pantries and sold at farmers’ markets. “We grow lots of tomatoes, cantaloupe, peppers, cucumbers, basil, the best bok choy you’ve ever tasted, rosemary, pine, lavender that will knock your socks off, lots of leaf lettuce, and chives,” says Walters. “Anything with a root, we can grow.”



While he has a long association with environmentalism, and speaks enthusiastically about the educational value of the Science Barge, Walters is through and through a river guy. “I’m not a traditional farmer. We have a wonderful educational staff for that.”

Raised on 214th Street in the Inwood neighborhood of Manhattan, where he lived until his 20s, Walters had all he needed as a child with the park and the

river so close by. “Any park that had Indian caves was alright by me,” he says of the natural rock overhangs in Inwood Hill Park that once sheltered Native Americans. By the age of 12, he was boating from an antique barge on the Harlem River. Walters eventually enlisted in the Navy at 18, where he served as an electrician. At President Jimmy Carter’s urging that the nation explore alternative energy sources, Walters opened a store with hopes of selling solar panels and wind turbines. (The store, instead, became a window business.) He went on to help build a Hudson River Sloop, Sojourner Truth; served as Beczak Environmental Education Center’s first executive director; and worked as a tour guide on the Yonkers Water Taxi thereafter.

Mostly, though, Walters prefers to reflect about the bygone era of canoeing the Hudson solo or hanging with the commercial fisherman he once knew. “One time, I paddled from Lake Champlain to the Long Island Sound,” he remembers. “It’s 220 miles. I just camped out and wrote stories about the people I met.”

These days, Walters is only aboard the Science Barge for extended hours on the weekends, but he is still on the river seven days a week. “If I miss a day, I feel like I should have been there. I am absolutely a river rat.” That’s what Walters calls old-timers in Yonkers who love the Hudson as he does—the ones who were down on the river during the days when it was polluted and untreated sewage was spilling into its waters from the pipes. “The real people that loved the river were there even then,” he says. “Now, you look up and down the shore and there’s all these condominiums. We have all these new high-rise buildings, a lot of people in from New York City who walk the promenade with their dogs. They enjoy the beauty of the river—that’s what we worked to get done.”

Walters sees the Science Barge, with its two beautiful glass houses on the waterfront, as the story of revitalization in Yonkers. “In the old days, we probably couldn’t have had a Science Barge because the area was so rough. It was a hard group of people that hung out at the river,” he says.

Walters’ latest and most significant efforts in community renewal involved day-lighting the Saw Mill River—a waterway running under Yonkers—a project he’s been involved with since late 2010. (The downtown portion of the river was covered in the 1920s by the Army Corps of Engineers to manage sanitation and floods.) Walters is also featured in the recently debuted documentary *Lost Rivers*, written and directed by Montreal-based filmmaker Caroline Bâcle.

The Science Barge is now open for educational tours during the week, for weekend walk-ons from noon to 6 pm, and hosts volunteers on Sundays from 10 am to noon. For more information about Groundwork Hudson Valley, visit groundworkhv.org.

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