

One oyster cage at a time

BY TARA SMITH

The Moriches Bay Project is preparing for their fifth summer season and co-founder Laura Fabrizio can't wait to get her hands wet.

"We are definitely not slowing down," she said, adding that the group is constantly discussing how they will raise the bar for saving the bay. According to Fabrizio, the plan is to continue efforts to restore shellfish to the bay as well as expand the eelgrass planting program.

In 2016, the Moriches Bay Project seeded over 400,000 oysters into the Moriches and Quantuck bays. Those numbers were achieved in part by thousands of "seedlings" from FLUPSY – a floating upweller system – installed in Moriches Bay at Windswept Marina last October.

"It's basically a force-feeding system that protects the shellfish from predators and helps them gain weight very quickly," said Vito Minei, executive director of Cornell University Cooperative Extension, describing the system at its unveiling last fall.

The \$10,000 system is tethered to the marina's dock with a pump that provides the young shellfish, housed in barrels and cages, with both oxygen and food. The constant flow of water through the rate "than 10 feet in the water to tend to themselves."

"It's not just growing shellfish, but will also act as a floating filtration plant to remove nitrogen from our waters," said Aram Terchunian, coastal geologist and Moriches Bay Project co-founder, explaining that the molluscs are able to absorb nearly 275 pounds of nitrogen each year.

"It sounds cute—and it is cute, but it's no laughing matter," Kim Tetrault said of FLUPSY and the water-preservation effort. Nearly 15 years ago, Tetrault founded the Southold Project for Aquaculture Training with a handful of local waterfront residents interested in bay preservation. The group focuses on repopulation but also has about 250 families involved in an oyster gardening group. SPAT has spearheaded shellfish repopulation efforts that have been implemented across the county from Peconic Bay to Tiana Bay and now, the Moriches Bay.

Once a thriving natural habitat for shellfish, eelgrass, and many other important bay species, decades of poor water quality have led to their dramatic decline. Slowly but surely, improvements are being observed. "We're lucky that the water quality on the East End is in pretty good shape, but we have to work to keep it that way. We have to be stewards of our environment and keep waters clean for future generations," Tetrault said.

For Fabrizio, that stewardship must start with early education. In 2016, a total of 4,147 people engaged with the Moriches Bay Project to do their part in helping local waterways, a number that surprised Fabrizio. "To bring 4,000 people together



Cornell Cooperative Extension Director Vito Minei, Supervisor Ed Romaine, Moriches Bay Project co-founder Laura Fabrizio and Councilman Dan Panico, with a handful of oyster seeds, present FLUPSY with an official sign last fall.

MT/Smith

for one cause is a really nice number, but we want to double that next year," Fabrizio said, setting her sights higher. "Once you bring that awareness, more can be done, and you give a bigger voice to the project and ultimately, to the bay," she said.

Volunteers from the Moriches Bay

Project have given lectures and live demonstrations to elementary, middle and high school students—a targeted audience that Fabrizio sees as the most impactful. "Kids go home and tell their parents, and then the whole family wants to know what they can do," she said, describing a chain reaction of awareness.

"Children are the future – they are the ones who will make an impact down the road. If you start young and get them excited, they feel that they can make a difference," she added. Since getting more

involved with students, Fabrizio has heard from many parents of high schoolers that their children have been so impacted by the project initiatives that they are considering going to college to study marine sciences.

"It's incredible how if you take the time to reach out to kids, you can impact them," Fabrizio said.

Catch up with the Moriches Bay Project and help build an oyster cage on Friday, April 21 at the Center Moriches Library at 4:30 p.m. Registration begins on Wednesday, April 12. Call 631-878-0940 for more information

Now, it's a matter of getting all generations in the community involved.

To get a taste of bay-saving projects, the Center Moriches Library will co-host "Save the Bay," a program for children ages 4 years old through sixth grade, on Friday, April 21 at 4:30 p.m. "It's the day before Earth Day," Fabrizio said, explaining that building an oyster cage is the perfect way to celebrate.

The group-made oyster cages will be used in real oyster farms this summer.

"If I can make them, anyone can make them," Fabrizio joked, explaining that the

simple process takes around 45 minutes to complete. The Moriches Bay Project will provide all necessary materials at no cost, she said. A cage can be made from simple materials such as a mesh bag – small enough to allow water to flow through but not let oysters, which are dime-sized at the time of planting, to fall out – zip ties and a floating device. "It's fun and educational, and it really engages the kids," Fabrizio said.

After the demo, it's up to the kids to spread the word. "It empowers them to understand that they can help do this, even if they tell just one person," Fabrizio said, adding that she hopes to see a heightened awareness about this. Seeing excited youth is what keeps her focused, she explained. "It makes me want to do more."

Following the oyster cage building event, the Moriches Bay Project will participate in the Great East End Cleanup on Earth Day – Saturday, April 22 – by supporting a bay cleanup starting at Cusogue Beach and going through Pikes Beach in Southampton. ■