

LONG ISLAND

polar plunge East Hampton

Proceeds benefited L'Arche, an organization that creates communities where people with and without intellectual disabilities live together as peers.



Members of L'Arche Long Island gathered at The Seafood Shop in Wainscott on Monday, January 1, 2018. The polar bear plunge, which raised funds for the organization, was held at Beach Lane in Wainscott. Photo Credit: Marlo Jappen

By Marlo Jappen

Updated March 3, 2018 11:52 AM

Colin Mather, owner of The Seafood Shop in Wainscott, has hosted the community's New Year's Day polar bear plunge at Beach Lane for 19 years.

The event benefits charity annually, and this year Mather decided to dedicate the plunge to Jean Lanier, a longtime customer of his who passed away last July at 71.

The proceeds went toward L'Arche Long Island, which was founded by Lanier. L'Arche is an international organization that creates communities where people with and without intellectual disabilities live together as peers. In December 2016, the L'Arche Long Island home opened in Riverhead.

"We eat and live amongst each other," said Kathleen Colon, administration manager and home life leader of L'Arche Long Island. "It's just about making their world bigger."

Mather's Hamptons establishment attracts some upscale clientele, including Jimmy Fallon, Katy Perry, Alec Baldwin, Jimmy Buffett, Bobby Flay and Martha Stewart. Mather, however, describes Lanier as modest.

“He was a very successful businessman in his own right,” Mather said. “But he never gave off the impression that he was ‘all that.’ He was always a kind and generous man.”

Lanier, originally from France, and his wife, Judith, divided their time between Paris and Wainscott. His heart was set on bringing L’Arche close to their Long Island home.

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The Laniers was first introduced to L’Arche when their daughter, Caroline Bernhardt-Lanier, spent a summer working as an assistant at the L’Arche flagship location in France, which opened in 1964. Jean Lanier formed a close friendship with L’Arche founder Jean Vanier and soon became a strong proponent of the organization. He served as board president of L’Arche Internationale and was also Board chair of L’Arche Long Island.

Before charging into the frigid waters of the North Atlantic, some participants joined Mather in a 1.6-mile jog from his shop to Beach Lane. Plungers later warmed up with complimentary clam chowder and hot beverages at The Seafood Shop.

“It’s almost like a baptism into the new year,” Mather said. “You’ve never felt so good as when you get out of that water. You feel fantastic for the rest of the day.”

— Mitchell Iden, president of L’Arche Long Island, and his son, Sam, 23, attended the event as onlookers.

Iden became involved with L’Arche Long Island because Sam has autism. Many parents of intellectually disabled children, he said, fear for when they won’t be around to care of their child.

“Seeing what a L’Arche home offers I think that it would be the best thing for him,” he said.

L’Arche Long Island was a passion Jean shared with wife Judith, who also contributed her time to the organization and was in attendance Monday. She said the only way the organization’s mission could truly be understood was to pay a visit to the home in Riverhead.

— “I would make that a New Year’s resolution,” Judith said. “It might just change your life.”

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