

Remembering John Krevey Hero of the Harbor

by Betsy Frawley Haggerty

Nothing was impossible

for John Krevey ~ or so it seemed. He bought an old lightship that had spent years on the bottom of Chesapeake Bay, dug tons of mud out of it, scraped off a million or so barnacles and (three years of work later) sailed it to New York City where it became one of the waterfront's most popular destinations. He championed public access to the waterfront, and when he couldn't find what he was

looking for, he created it on a rusty old barge that he turned into the "People's Pier." Perhaps more remarkably, he battled one government agency after another that wanted to close his pier down or set some rule he did not like—and he won time and time again.

He dreamed big and envisioned what some saw as impossible projects, and he brought them to life with his remark-

able creativity, steely stubbornness and inscrutable patience.

He seemed unstoppable—until February 4, when he collapsed and died of a heart attack at age 62 while on vacation with his son and friends in Santo Domingo, Dominican Republic, leaving his wife and business partner Angela, daughter Kyra, son Kyle, and literally hundreds of friends trying to figure out



Pier 66 Maritime at 26th St. on the Hudson.
Fireboat John J. Harvey is in the foreground; Frying Pan right behind it.

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how to live in a world without Krevey's magic and generosity.

I'm proud that he counted me among his many, many friends. And I think the best way to honor his memory and legacy is to let a few of those friends share some memories. But first a little background for those of you who did not have the privilege of knowing the man.

John Krevey grew up in Seattle and became a boat lover in a city that was, and still is, wise enough to champion its waterfront. When he moved to New York in the late 1970s, he was shocked to find a city that turned its back on its waterways. But that was to his benefit because he was able to rent space for his electrical contacting business, R-2 Electric., in a warehouse on Pier 63 near 23rd Street and the Hudson River. No one but Krevey seemed to notice it was waterfront property. He gleefully signed the lease, added large windows where garage doors had blocked the views, and figured since he had water-

front property, he could start a marina. He didn't bother with permits or licensing or whatever, but that was Krevey: Do what you want to do, and deal with the consequences later. He next owned a series of boats—a raft made up of abandoned police barriers atop 55-gallon oil drums, a sunken wooden cabin cruiser that he rescued and got running, a couple of derelict tugs, and eventually the historic Frying Pan lightship.

Hero of the Harbor

His 1980s purchase of Frying Pan, a 133-foot former U.S. Coast Guard lightship that served 35 years as a floating lighthouse off North Carolina's Cape Fear, was, he said later, the turning point of his life. He liked its history, the rust, the mud, the barnacles, the work and its potential for fun. When he bought it, he envisioned it as a floating nightclub, which it was for a while. He and a coterie of friends restored it (somewhat) and brought it to New York from the Chesapeake—a trip that took three years

with long stops in Annapolis, Baltimore and Philadelphia. When he arrived in New York in 1990, there was no place to dock it since the water in front of Krevey's Pier 63 business was way too shallow.

Frying Pan was a nomad for about six years, finding temporary homes and then moving on. It spent time at an anchorage behind the Statue of Liberty, at a state-owned pier in Chelsea, at anchor in the Hudson River just north of the West 79th Street Boat Basin, at the Intrepid Museum, and so on. All the while, Krevey was searching for a permanent home for his bright red ship. That quest turned him into a waterfront advocate and a champion of historic ships. He cofounded the North River Historic Ship Society, a nonprofit advocacy group that fought to make sure that there would be place for historic ships in Hudson River Park—the Frying Pan and others—and he committed himself to providing a place where the public could enjoy the water.



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John and Angela Krevey won the Metropolitan Waterfront Alliance's Hero of the Harbor award in 2004.

Frying Pan and later the barge, "But John always won. His memory and appreciation to detail with regard to laws and building codes was amazing. He was great at gaming the system."

"John was a pioneer. There wasn't a water dependent group or program he wouldn't offer to host or support in some way," says Carter Craft, who as Director of the Metropolitan Waterfront Alliance, presented John and Angela Krevey with the group's annual Hero of the Harbor Award in 2004. "John had a lot of vision, which combined with his mechanical ability to bring a vision into physical reality, were skills few people have." Craft, who is now an independent waterfront planner, continues, "He made his own wheels, made them turn, and Angela kept him and the operation on track and moving forward at the right pace. "He as the kind of guy you could still be friends even after he sank your boat." (Since raising sunken boats was a Krevey specialty, it was not a long-term problem.)

Kreveyland

The crew of the fireboat John J. Harvey called Pier 63/66 Maritime "Kreveyland." "I probably invented the term," says Huntley Gill, a co-owner of the John J. Harvey, which makes its home at Pier 66, rent-free. "Beside being unavoidably fun—always—you go out there and realize that it removes the restrictions of what you are allowed to do in life. It does not pay attention to the rules of architecture and design, or to what a park or a pier should be—and it is wonderful. It's a grownup version of the Magic Kingdom. But I hate to use that reference to Disneyland because that is so fake, and this is so real. I'd go out there feeling irritated about some thing, and I'd see John coming down the pier

with that wacky walk. He'd say hello, and I'd remember I was in Kreveyland, and I didn't have to deal with whatever was annoying me. John's charm was amazing."

And famous. The stories of cabin cruiser Useless and some old tugs he used as party platforms in the years before Frying Pan are too long and many to tell here, but they were legend, and seemed often to involve encounters with the Coast Guard, the police or some bureaucrat that tried to stop him—but didn't. Andy Blan, whose friendship goes back 28 years, remembers helping John ferry passengers to "Outlaw Parties," held on his various vessels. "The entire downtown glitterati would attend," Russell Buckingham, then a nightclub-promoter, remembers.

Buckingham, now a highly respected portrait painter, was with John when he first saw Frying Pan. "It was an amazingly beautiful ship with two feet of mud everywhere. We immediately fell in love with her." Buckingham became a partner in the venture, and says he and Krevey were together every day for six years while they worked on the boat and studied

for the captain's licenses. He chokes up when he tells me this. Buckingham and Krevey remained close friends, but geography kept them from seeing one another often in recent years.

"John enjoyed being a host," Buckingham continues. "He loved having people over and he was generous to a fault. Even when we were working on the boat in Maryland, he'd say, 'Let's invite as many people as we can,' and we'd fill up his limos with 20 – 30 people and drive down."

"John had a fleet of town cars," Eric Fischer recalls. "We removed the roofs so they would be permanent convertibles and we'd ride down to Maryland and shovel mud and learn how to weld. John would treat us to great stone crab meals. For an office drone like me, it was a great escape."

Paying Tribute

A hundred or so of Krevey's friends and family members gathered at a Greenwich Village funeral home a week after his death to pay him tribute and to console one another. More than a dozen people spoke—members of his staff, seniors from the community and old friends—telling stories that brought tears and laughter, sometimes simultaneously.

Danny Cronin, a friend from the early days and a Krevey protégé in the waterfront restaurant business, acted as emcee. Cronin, Krevey and others met in the 1970s when they all lived in an apartment building on East 22nd Street. "It was like a the "Friends" sitcom," Cronin says of the building. The initial unifying factor was a terrible landlord, but it became Krevey when he moved to the waterfront and started messing around in boats. The 22nd Street friends were among the people who survived mishaps in Useless and rode the town

cars to Maryland. Recently Krevey convinced Cronin to open a waterfront restaurant of his own on the Connecticut River. They were supposed to be partners. "And then he went and died on me," Cronin says. "Now I have a 22-year lease on a property rife with Kreveyesque problems. It floods every year, for example. I need his mechanical expertise, and his spirit."

Eddie Taylor, now the owner of a seafood company and the Greenwich Village restaurant Fish, lived through the early Frying Pan adventures as well. "I remember one time," he says, "when Chesapeake Bay was frozen and John and I walked across the bay. Our picture was on the cover of the Baltimore Sun." Like other Frying Pan veterans, Taylor is full of crazy adventure stories, which he sums up in a single word. "Great. John was great!" He invited the whole crowd to come down the street to his restaurant for refreshments after the tribute.

John Doswell, a newer friend—only 18 years—who worked with Krevey on many waterfront projects, dared to look to the future. "He'll be hell in heaven, adding steel platforms with no building permits, breaking all the rules," he said of Krevey. "He leaves a big vacuum, but a larger legacy. His accomplishments and vision on the waterfront are large, and his generosity toward literally hundreds is legend. No one can fill his shoes."

But his businesses will continue on. Pier 66 Maritime, the Frying Pan and his other waterside eateries—in Brooklyn Bridge Park and Riverside Park South—will be open about May 1—earlier if the weather turns warm. No details are available yet, but there will be a major waterfront celebration of John Krevey's life during the warm-weather months,

John Krevey helping out at the Lehigh Valley Railroad Barge at a 2009 North River Historic Ship Society vessel rendezvous.



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