

Columnists



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"In stumbling on to the Bums, not only did we find a cool group of kids to be our friends, but one that was not a clique."

---Former Jones Beach "Bum" alum,
Sharyn Fuller (formerly Shari Friedman)

Ginger Bonner - nee Ginger Labensky - grew up in Westbury, following what then was a fairly typical familial migration pattern of Bronx to Queens to Long Island. She and her family arrived in 1969. Then 11, Ginger started school not knowing anybody and feeling the discomfort newcomers typically feel.

At the end of that academic year, she discovered Jones Beach and fell in easily with a group of carefree (and sometimes disaffected) youths ranging in age from 12 to 22. They gathered at the stairs of the restaurant at Field 4. Some played guitars; some played the railings as bongo and conga percussion instruments; all seemed to embrace one another absent any conditions.

"They became my family," said Bonner, now the activity director at the Amber Court Assisted Living Facility in Westbury.

Shari Friedman, for instance (now Sharyn Fuller, of Raleigh, N.C.), then an introverted 14-year-old from Plainview, vividly recalls feeling "pretty unhappy and miserable all the time," she said, except when among her pals at Jones Beach, who soon began referring to themselves as the "**Jones Beach Bums**" and who spent the off season "hanging" at Eisenhower Park, then known as Salisbury Park, among other places around Long Island.

"I hung out at the beach all through high school," Fuller said, "which for me was from 1971 to 1974. After I graduated, I didn't go to college right away - not until 1977, at which time I went to SUNY New Paltz, majoring in psychology. And since then I've led a more straight- and-narrow life, getting married in '83 and mostly being a stay-at-home mom since.

"But in stumbling on to the Bums," she said, "not only did we find a cool group of kids to be our friends, but one that was not a clique, one that opened its arms and hearts to everyone - no matter how funny looking, no matter if they stuttered, or if they were extremely short or were extremely tall or were gay or black or shy or dorky or whatever. Being nice was the only requirement. That was why we grew so large in such a short period of time."

Robbie Indovino of Nesconset was 15 in 1971. He lived in East Meadow and had transferred from Catholic to public school when he was in seventh grade. There, he'd met and befriended "Jungle Jim" Bonczek, who still lives in the original Levitt house in which he was raised. "I was working at Jones Beach flipping burgers," said Indovino, "and Jimmy said, 'We have a group that hangs out at Field 4. Why don't you come?' That's how I met them.

"One of the original Bums, Pete "Pete the Freak" Ruggiero \, was in my wedding party in 1980," Indovino said. "He was the oldest of the group. He's 56. I'm 48."

In 1990, Ruggiero, Bonczek and Indovino tossed around the idea of a 20-year reunion of the Bums. Indovino, director of operations for Maurice Villency Furniture Co. in Jericho, picked Lido Beach as a reunion site, "because we wanted a picnic facility," he said.

"We went on a quest for seven or eight months, put out fliers and met every few weeks at my house. It got larger and larger. People flew in from California and Florida and wherever. You can see it all on the Web site Shari built back in March 2004: www.jonesbeachbums.com. We decided after that '91 reunion that we would meet every year on the last Saturday of July at Field 4 at Jones Beach."

Among the Bums they did not find was Ginger Bonner.

In 2001, a friend of Bonner's, Judy Smith, of Memphis, Tenn., lost her husband and baby grandson in a tragic car accident. After four months had passed, Bonner invited Smith to visit New York for the first time in her life. "I took her to a Broadway show," Bonner said. "I took her on a Circle Line cruise around Manhattan, past the Twin Towers - believe it or not, at the end of the summer of 2001. I took her to Central Park, whatever and wherever she wanted to see or go.

"Then, because we were so close, even though we didn't see each other very much, I wanted her to know more about my life. I took her and her daughter, Elizabeth, who was 18 at the time, to Jones Beach. I got married at Jones Beach (unfortunately I've since divorced). Jones Beach has always meant a lot to me. I would visit and stand at the top of the stairs and just smile. It was a carefree, happy time, before bills and rent and all of that got in the way.

"At the stairs by the restaurant, I told them that when we were kids, we used to play a game called Winky Dink. It was a simple game that amounted to adolescent boys and girls wrestling.

"I say the words, 'Winky Dink,' and a man wearing a Hawaiian shirt and sandals turns to me and says, 'Winky Dink? Are you here for the reunion?'

"'What reunion?' I say. The guy is a total stranger to me.

"'Ginger!'" screams a woman in the group.

"Now, it's 30 years. These people obviously are not hippies any more. But Shari is there, and I start remembering people, and we're saying, 'Oh, my God, it's YOU!' over and over.

"It's just one of the happiest memories of my life," Bonner said.

"I keep it in my pocket at all times."

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