

# An Extra Set of Hands

The Island Fellows program began, as do many efforts at the Island Institute, with an impromptu brainstorming session at a program review meeting one Monday morning in the late fall of 1998.

We were discussing the surprising success of an effort begun the previous summer to place interns aboard lobster boats in Penobscot Bay. The project was a collaboration with the University of Maine and Maine's Department of Marine Resources to record the number and location of juvenile lobsters, oversized lobsters, and "V-notched" females. Given the sensitivity of the data that was being collected from individual fishermen and the secrecy among them as to their fishing strategies, we were dubious about achieving our goal of recruiting 20 fishermen. But at the end of the first season, we were shocked to discover that 78 fishermen had participated.

We began to ask ourselves why this project had been so successful, and what we had learned that we might apply elsewhere.

The most obvious lesson was that the success of the student interns was because the lobstermen were being interviewed on their home turf—aboard their boats on the water where they fished and were most comfortable. Fishermen were not asked to share this information in some government office ashore. A second lesson was that the students aboard the boats were trained to listen respectfully, to ask questions and to record the information lobstermen might agree to share.

Given the fact that sea-sampling data could influence a pending federal determination of whether Maine lobsters were overfished, we thought it was worth extending the project to other areas. In the brainstorming mode, we knew that the winter lobster season on Monhegan would be opening in a few months, and maybe Monhegan lobstermen would want to participate. But if so, someone would have to live on the island. Our marine resource director at the time was a Bowdoin grad who suggested he might be able to find a Bowdoin student looking for a January field project topic for a senior thesis. And so it was that an island residency requirement was inserted into the still inchoate program.

We recruited Susan Little, an environmental studies major at Bowdoin, to work on the Monhegan sea-sampling program with local fishermen, and she lived and worked on the island for a month before returning to college. Since lobster sea-sampling information had not been collected in Casco Bay, it seemed logical to inquire whether Chebeague Island lobstermen wanted to participate that spring. Since Susan had already graduated, we wanted to distinguish her work from an internship, so we decided to call it a fellowship; thus

the Island Fellows program began, and she became our first Island Fellow.

Since that time 10 years ago, the Island Institute has placed 76 Island Fellows in 20 different island and mainland communities. Communities now compete to participate in the Island Fellows program through an application process that awards points for collaborative projects that leverage the activities established by community-based nonprofits—schools, libraries, historical societies, and town offices. Depending on the nature of the work, Island Fellows projects last either one or two years, so projects are judged in part by plans for their long-term sustainability. How will the projects proceed after the Fellows are gone? Island advisors are also key. Collectively, the network of Island Fellow advisors have contributed over 20,000 hours of volunteer labor to help ensure a project's success.



Jess Stevens and Susan Little on Chebeague Island

What have Island Fellows projects accomplished? Island Fellows have initiated ongoing music, drama and arts programs in a handful of island communities. School and library catalogs have been computerized and integrated in many communities. Physical education programs in a number of island schools are another legacy. Town offices have hired Island Fellows for administrative support as a

result of the increasing complexity of running island towns. Affordable housing projects have been staffed by Island Fellows. Island Fellows have helped prepare alternative energy plans in three island communities. A new health program has been established in another community.

These are real accomplishments—but there is another result that no one anticipated. Approximately 10 Island Fellows have remained on the islands where they were assigned, where some of these have married and now, *mirabile dictu*, there is a new generation of what we like to think of as Junior Fellows!

Although there are many notable legacies of the Island Fellows program, perhaps the most enduring contributions to community life have been the thousands of informal interactions between Island Fellows and often overextended community members momentarily overwhelmed by their roles in the enormous effort of trying to sustain a way of life in their isolated communities. At the end of the day, the biggest contributions of Island Fellows may be that, literally and figuratively, they are another set of hands carrying a part of the load during the endless process that builds and refreshes community life.

Philip Conkling

## ALDEN ROBINSON Long Island

To say that there's no privacy on an island isn't quite true, and it isn't fair to say that everybody knows what everybody else is doing all of the time. However, you do learn random things about people on an island that you wouldn't learn anywhere else. One family might have spent three years in India. Another might be installing a new septic system. One man might have lost a finger in a childhood sledding accident. Another woman might be getting her deck rebuilt.

Fragments of people's lives emerge bit by bit. It's not a voyeuristic thing; it's just the information economy that makes a place like this run. Early on I learned that you can't survive here without listening to all those stories. Any story you hear, I've learned, is actually two stories: the story itself, and the point of view of whoever is telling it. Unless you pay attention to both, you're apt to get yourself in trouble.

Looking back on a year of listening to those stories, I realize that this has been my first real introduction to politics. Of course, there were politics in high school and college, but they pale in comparison to the politics of a small town. Intellectually, I already knew there were "two sides to everything" before I came here, but until you get someone started on "whether we should have become a town" or "whether this guy's property line runs that close to the house" or "why this local organization just spent so much money on that piece of equipment," you don't really know what that means. None of it's bad; it's just the way people relate to each other, and in a small environment there's no avoiding it.

What's important, and what's so inspiring about the community on Long Island, is that all the opinions and rivalries and past conflicts can evaporate at a moment's notice when necessary. Lifelong antagonists can cooperate flawlessly on a rescue call. The guy who holds a grudge against the planning board can also go out of his way to help the town when it needs to store equipment on his land. Newcomers can work shoulder to shoulder with lifetime islanders on the affordable housing committee, even though they might both be competing for the same piece of land in the future.

It's a cliché to say it, but that really is the magic of an island community. You may disagree with your neighbors, but there's only one store, only one ferry back to town, only a few miles of road—and unless you want to be miserable, you may as well push your differences aside to say hello.

That smallness may sound claustrophobic, but it can also be thrilling. One of the paradoxes of island life is that most of the time, it's easy to forget you're surrounded by water. Unless you're riding on the ferry or driving all the way across the island, you only see water on one side at a time.

Several of my favorite impressions of the island have come from riding around the west end at night with friends, seeing all the closed-up summer houses, the dark ocean and the lighted buoys flashing in the sound, and the glow in the sky from Portland, and realizing what a small rock we're sitting on, in the darkness outside the big city.

Adjusting to life here took some doing. It's a challenging order: move to a tiny little town where everyone has known



*Alden Robinson served as the Louis W. Cabot Fellowship Fellow on Long Island from 2006–2008.*

everyone else forever and try to fit into the social fabric of the community. It doesn't seem like it should work, except that somehow, people are friendly, and we all get along and have fun, even though we're all different and we're all a little weird in our own ways. After a while it stopped mattering that I hadn't lived here forever, because there's only one store and only one boat back to town, and hanging out with the islanders eventually seemed like the logical thing to do. Recently, I've started thinking that if I lived with my friends in the city, I'd probably be lonely.

I'd probably also be bored. I didn't think there'd be much to do out on the island at first, but now I find myself wondering what happened to my free time. It's a struggle just to sit down and complete this portfolio project because, as I sit here, I'm getting phone calls about setting up our new property tax database, and I hear the sound of logging crews clearing tree damage on the pieces of land I mapped out for them. I haven't been counting, but I'm sitting on the porch as I write this, and I'm sure I know the names of everyone who's walked or driven past.

One of my friends lives in New York now. She regales me with the antics of the family in the apartment upstairs. They're hilarious, but she doesn't know their names. After this year, I can't imagine living like that. AUGUST 2007

## SCOTT SELL Frenchboro

For over two years I lived with the same 65 people on Frenchboro, working with them, eating with them, confiding in them and helping them in any way I could. The first few months on the island were like a dream. All my worries about being so far away from everything I knew disappeared as soon as I arrived, and I felt like I was able to jump into things with both feet.

My time in the school was immediately wonderful: I took to the children right away, and I think they took to me. I offered music, art, drama, physical education and creative

writing classes, providing support and acting as a resource for the two classroom teachers and the preschool teacher. I read to the kids at the end of every day. They made me be “it” for every game of freeze tag at recess, and they refused to play after I blew out my ankle (while chasing an especially quick kid down the cemetery hill). The younger ones demanded piggyback rides and the older ones wanted to show off their artwork and tell me their best stories.

The rest of my hours each day were spent with the townspeople of Frenchboro. It wasn't long before they noticed that I showed up everywhere, like some kind of bad penny, and I wasn't going away anytime soon. I assisted the Board of Selectmen on a number of community development projects, including working waterfront grants, town building renovations, and health-care issues. I also worked in both the library and the historical society, helping to organize and catalog materials for present and future use, to the benefit of the school, town and visitors to the island. After a while, I managed to get myself involved, in one way or another, in nearly every facet of island life, from coaching the children's baseball team and helping with school productions to calling numbers at bingo nights. I was convinced that I had the best job ever.

In a place that was so independent from the distractions of the mainland, it soon became clear to me what islanders hold dear: a productive school, a supportive community, and a healthy lobster fishery. My desire to understand every aspect of Frenchboro resulted in a friendship with the island's oldest lobster fisherman and a sternman job aboard his boat. I learned something new about the island and myself every time I went out with them. We told jokes, he told stories, we sang along to old country songs while we pushed and pulled through the day. But, perhaps more important than the physical work we did, I also learned so much more about the place where I lived: the dynamics of relationships that I'd previously only understood the surface of, the lobster business and the role it plays, the importance of tradition, diligent labor and thoughtful consideration for the island's future generations. By becoming an integral part of the town in this way, I was able to learn about the essence of what binds a community together.

On the night before I left Frenchboro, I drove down the hill to the ferry terminal. From here you can see bits of everything: some of Swan's Island, the Sisters, Harbor Island, Cadillac Mountain, and the whole of the sky. It's still and quiet and one of my favorite spots to be when the sun has just set. I sat and thought of what it means to be in love with a place, to be so acutely aware of the elation and heartache that goes along with being infatuated with where you live.

I feel that my time on the island, for the two years of my fellowship and for the foreseeable future, is like a torrid love affair, something thrilling and jarring both. And right now, we are on a break from each other. We have started seeing other people and other places. There are no hard feelings. I've gone my way, and the island will stay right there like it has for hundreds of years. And if (or more likely, when) I decide to return, even for a little while, it will accept me graciously. Small things will have changed and the children I knew so well will have grown in innumerable ways, and the smell might not be how I remember it. But I imagine I will know I'm home again; I'll be happy for the things that haven't changed, and I'll be reminded of this incredible opportunity I've had, and I know I'll feel nothing but grateful. APRIL 2009



*Scott Sell served as the William Bingham Fellow for Rural Education, working with the Frenchboro Elementary School, from 2006–2008.*

## MORGAN WITHAM

Isle au Haut

Last spring, on a predictably drizzle-filled Sunday, I found myself equipped with a nail gun, sheathing a roof. As someone who is fond of neither heights nor equipment heavier than a blender, it was not destined to rank among my favorite days. But the work needed to be done, and Isle au Haut was obviously short on able-bodied folks that weekend.

On the bright side, the experience stood me in good stead later, when the generous owner of my lodgings came to stay for a few weeks in the summer, his energetic entourage of dogs and daughters in tow. The instant family was fun, but it meant the quietest place to work was on the veranda roof outside my bedroom window. Minus the nail gun and exposed rafters, this height seemed downright pleasant. It also served



*Morgan Witham served as the Isle au Haut Education and Library Fellow from 2007–2009.*

to entertain passersby as they placed bets on whether I'd been banished from the house proper or was just contemplating a jump.

For anyone familiar with the Island Institute Fellows program, being driven to new heights is a pretty typical experience, and it illustrates how a fellowship works. You end up doing things you consider outside the realm of your ability, and the forced growth eventually proves serendipitous. I was forced to confront life from a heady new perspective, through foul weather and fair.

In the spring, I had also been pulled onto the Isle au Haut Comprehensive Planning Committee. Again, I didn't have much experience, but research and the written word don't make me nauseous, so I figured that was a good start. As a Fellow, my primary responsibility is to listen, and that is well within my comfort zone. At committee meetings, always scheduled at 7:00 p.m. on Friday nights, I couldn't help but be enthralled. Once again I was pushed to look out over the island, this view charted in facts and figures and shaped by community survey.

One thing islanders don't seem to lack is vision. Views on specific details may conflict, and walking that line between change and tradition is the most tense of high wires, but the ideas—the potential and the desire to adapt and sustain the community—they are all there, whether you're at committee meetings or the library, game nights or potlucks. Given their size and the social commitment required of the residents, Maine islands offer a unique opportunity to pilot and pioneer. When a population is so small and feels so finite, the individual's share of collective responsibility is amplified. This is empowering. It also burns people out.

Not a news flash, I know. The Fellows program was built with an eye toward providing an extra 40 to 80 man-hours a week that islanders couldn't otherwise afford. As the program has grown, so too have the expectations, and the realization of what can be accomplished. Being handy to sheathe a roof is great, but how about installing some solar panels while you're up there?

In eight months, my fellowship will be over. I'll be winding up my projects in the school and library, and moving on—but

hopefully not away. There's the comprehensive plan to work on, and the major inter-island issue of energy. There will be the crucial trick of making my own ends meet, and I might fail, fall, or yes, burn out—but living on what is called the High Island, I've grown to love the view. JANUARY 2009

## SIOBHAN RYAN

Swan's Island

Usually the fire pager sounds like a fading Red Sox game on AM radio—you don't get any detail. That July morning at 3:30 a.m., I bolted up from bed and croaked, "Did I hear *library*?" My fiancé Isaac, a volunteer fireman and lobsterman, rushed out, saying he'd call.

Instead, I called him, and he didn't hesitate, even as sadness filled his voice: "It's gone," he said. "The library is gone." The fire had been so hot that it blew the windows 20 feet beyond the building, the skylights became vents for towers of flame, and the only thing left unscathed was the fire escape. A bolt of lightning probably caused the July 2008 fire that destroyed the Swan's Island Library.

In the fall of 2005, I had started a two-year fellowship for the Island Institute. The rest of the story happened like this: arrive on Swan's Island; hunker down in two century-old buildings—one my rental home, the other a refurbished schoolhouse that was the library; get set up on a blind date at a party after something resembling an inquisition at a Baptist Ladies' Aide meeting; fall in love with that blind date; get married.

That is why, even though I am no longer an Island Fellow, I still take the 6:45 a.m. ferry from Swan's Island, holding the cup of tea that my husband prepares most mornings, on my way to Bar Harbor and back again every day.

Before Bar Harbor, I'd spent two years working in the libraries on Swan's Island and Frenchboro. The work was described as fairly technical, as both island libraries wanted assistance with updating, or, in Frenchboro's case, creating a catalog, and maybe working on some grants and collection development. Candi Joyce, Ruth Davis and I picked away at all of those tasks. We wrote grants for software and hardware, audiobooks and DVDs, programming and capital improvement.

Our work was even recognized by the American Library Association when I was named an Emerging Leader, with all of us knowing that our team was making the progress happen. In reality, all of those grants, improvements and accolades were not what defined my fellowship. Being an Island Fellow was different from being a librarian, as it was the community that really breathed life into our projects. There were all of those raucous Garden Club meetings; the two-week period when 15 high school students moved an entire museum collection; that winter we spent lugging water from the fire station to wash hands and flush the toilet because the pipes had frozen; and a resident mouse that made it difficult to leave chocolate around.

Excitement in our work reached a high point with the First Annual Chowder Cook-Off. The Swan's Island Library had



David A. Tyler

*Island Fellows gather at the 2008 annual dinner held to recognize their work.*

promoted our cook-off fund-raiser for a few weeks, hoping to gain a few entries. Then, on the second Saturday in August 2006, 13 different people showed up with chowders ranging from jalapeño crab to the Manhattan variety. Other islanders came armed with dollars, ready to vote for their favorite chowder. The event was a wild celebration of food and community. Chowder was served freely, people talked trash, and the dollar bills mounted. When Donna Wiegles chowder won the contest, the debate raged on for months as to why. Had her cheddar-baked biscuits helped sway the vote—or was it her salesmanship?

My fellowship was also largely defined by the circumstances surrounding the introduction to my husband. Marion Stinson had called me after the meeting at Baptist Ladies' Aide, telling me that her son was having a party, and that he had asked her to "invite the new girl so she could meet some people." Isaac hadn't invited me. Marion only casually mentioned to him as he went to take a shower that a gal close to his age would be showing up at his party. He decided to shave.

My friends love the next part of this story. On an island of 350 people, I had already been invited to another gathering. I was going to skip meeting this "Isaac." When I told my party hosts, the Applins, about Marion's invitation, they decided to leave their home and go to Isaac's. That night, just as Isaac assumed the "new girl" wouldn't be coming, an additional 10 people descended upon his festivities. Even though I turned down his offer of a ride in his lobster boat to Frenchboro the next day for work, Isaac and I got married in August of 2008.

On that July morning, before our wedding, two years of my work and hundreds of hours of volunteer labor burned



*Siobhan Ryan served as an Island Fellow from 2005–2007, working with the Swan's Island Library, the Frenchboro Library and Frenchboro Historical Society.*

almost completely. I cried, and then became irate that all my work was gone. For over 12 hours the volunteer firemen contained the fire until only a smoking pile of rubble remained.

Even as the hot spots were squelched, the volunteers stayed. They combed through the wreckage, some on their knees, looking to save any scrap—a bit of a bottle, a charred book, or a rare island document from the archives. There was little to be salvaged. As they picked over the debris, I realized that it wasn't just my work that was gone, but the work of an entire community.

Reflecting on my time as an Island Fellow, and all the community involvement in my work, I know we'll rebuild, and the work will continue. Perhaps when the new library rises, the pipes won't freeze and the mouse won't take up residency . . . but the chowder will still flow freely. APRIL 2009

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