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# ROUGH SAILING



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## **YACHT CLUB MEMBERS RIDING OUT RACISM.**

Sometimes when members of the Breezy Point Yacht Club Yacht Club cruise from their slip in the Narraskatuck Bay in Amityville and into the Great South Bay, the marine radio crackles with hate. "Hey, have you ever seen so many of them?" One anonymous mariner once remarked, said Breezy Point Yacht Club member Jim Mckelvin. "Nigger, get off the radio", said another boater, recalled James

Green, 65, another Breezy Point Yacht Club member.

Such is the abuse that occasionally endured by the proud and mostly grandparent- aged members of what remains Long Island's only predominantly black yacht club with the marina.

All we do is laugh at that," says the 71-year-old Mckelvin of the remarks sometimes heard over the radio, which he and other Breezy Point Yacht Club members do not believe represent the more open-minded views of most boaters. "We are all intelligent people here." "We know these things exist." "You just go ahead on and don't allow it to bother you."

Breezy Point Yacht Club, founded in 1967, is one of the 11 predominantly black yacht clubs in the northeast including Freeport High Tide Yacht Club that does not yet have waterfront property or boat slips. Two common, strains run through the organizations. The founder felt locked out of the white dominated boating clubs either because of the racism or cost; and generations of families make up the core of the membership said John McNeil, Commodore of the Paerdegat Yacht Club in Brooklyn, which was founded in 1963. McNeil is also a delegate to original group of black clubs none as a Federation of Yacht Club's organization. The organization

includes clubs in New York, Philadelphia and Maryland. Despite the accomplishments of these groups have made, McNeil acknowledges that they face a challenge in keeping up their membership. At Paerdegat, which has 31 slips, membership has dropped to 13. At Breezy Point Yacht Club, membership is 29, down for 49 nine years ago. "It's the money mostly I think," said McNeil. "Also young people today aren't as interested in the camaraderie and the work that is required to maintain a club such as this. I think that's true not just for black clubs these days but for any kind of private clubs. Like the other black yacht clubs and despite its Gatsby like name of the Breezy Point Yacht Club is a social organization of the middle class. Few members have been well-off including attorneys, and a judge but most in the club I like McKelvin was a retired park ranger. Other active members have retired from jobs as auto mechanics, retail clerks, and corporate middle managers.

"To me its god sent," said John Nixon, who explained he could not afford to be a member at most of the clubs. I am so happy you came my way.

The clubs 20 slips are arranged in an L-shaped around the white clapboard house on the side of a formal boat yard at the southern terminus of Ketcham Avenue. Members enjoy the water view from the plastic patio chairs arranged under a big white party tent pitched permanently at the intersection docs. The club bought the waterfront lot in Amityville. 20 years ago after a decade of saving money and meeting in each other's living rooms.

We are very proud that we have something we can call our own, said Florence Gaines the current club secretary.

Like many of lot club enthusiasts, the Breezy Point Yacht Club members don white slacks and navy blue blazers a few times a year for fundraising events. But there are no mega-yacht or oceangoing sailboats tied up on

Ketcham Avenue. The clubs owners all own cabin cruisers and runabout powerboats ranging in size from 22 feet to 38 feet. The club keeps cost down by charging no special dock maintenance fee and allowing members to leave the boats in the water all year, eliminating the need for expensive winter storage. It's the clubs genesis that sets it apart from virtually every other on Long Island.

Thirty years ago, Chris Leftenant, cesspool company owners from Massapequa apply for membership applied for membership into an all white yacht club to which several of his white fishing buddies belonged. Because of his friends' sponsorship, Leftenant said, he expected to be initiated. But all the members weren't so sure. They said, Chris is different; who was then turned both thumbs down to indicate how the vote played out. With the gesture Leftenant, who speech has been slowed by a recent illness, received warm and appreciative laughter from Clarence Holloway and John Nixon.

Holloway, 73, a retired electronics engineer, was one of the founders with the Lieutenant who suggested the idea after his rejection. Nixon a retired auto mechanic and State Department of Motor Vehicles employees, has been a member for 10 years. The club's five original members all docked their boats at the public marina in Copiague. "Now, we're not an all black yacht club by choice. Don't get that idea," said Nixon. Chris decided to form this yacht club. How we added the bylaws don't say you have to be black." Nixon: "Look, it's not even in our thoughts." "We try to get along with everyone." "Most of us are at an age where in our lifetimes we suffered a lot of prejudice." We're not about that. Over the years they have been one or two white members." The roster is now all black however. Breezy Point Yacht Club member say they believe that economics is the main reason there are not more black boaters. Even if the incomes of black Americans are greater than in the past, social history of poverty

and exclusion from many activities that cost significant money continues to make it less likely for black people to become involved in boating than whites they said. So even today, as Holloway puts it, "a black man on a boat is a double take."

Nixon said that he was washing down his 28 foot sports coupe at the Breezy Point Yacht Club docks recently when a white boater glided past. "Do you own that boat?" The passing boater asked. "Yes I do" Nixon said he replied. "I never known a colored person to own a boat." Nixon reported the other man is saying. "Why people still tend to think that it's beyond our economical means to actually own a boat?" Said Nixon. "Unless we're stealing or selling drugs..." "Or running numbers." Holloway chimed in.

The limited number of boat slips has something to do with the dwindling membership at Breezy Point Yacht Club its member suspect. In hopes of sparking interest in recreational boating

among young people, the club reaches out through fishing trip outings and boat safety lessons.

Such as the legacy of societal racism that it seems the members of Breezy Point Yacht Club Yacht Club cannot quite simply be weekend boaters. That weekend tinkering, the spur of the moment fishing trips, the insulation last Saturday of the new club sign at the southern terminus of Ketcham Avenue – it all means just a bit more.

Like the other members of the Breezy Point Yacht Club, James Green seems to accept that, even to embrace it. "If I can relax here, and have my fun," says Green, "and still put out the message to the children of today, about what we can do as a race and about where we can go with study and initiative, then I'm happy."