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Checking in With... Marine Biology Alumnus Bill Geraghty '78

Oyster gardening initiative prompts memories from longtime supporter of Marine and Natural Sciences



June 11, 2013 | [Brian E. Clark](#)

Even with a fruitful, decades-long investment banking career in New York demanding much of his time and energy, alumnus Bill Geraghty '78 has never strayed far from his roots in marine biology.

A longtime supporter of all things marine biology at Roger Williams, Geraghty spearheaded an effort among his fellow alumni to create a memorial scholarship in honor of their beloved mentor – the late faculty member Mark Gould. In 2010, Geraghty and his wife, Kathleen, helped to launch the Luther H. Blount Shellfish Hatchery at Roger Williams, complete with the Lobster Mortarboard Society Observation Room.

He's also stayed involved from his home on Long Island. In the late 1990s, Geraghty found himself collaborating with the [SPAT oyster restoration program at the nearby Cornell University Cooperative Extension](#). He introduced the idea to researchers at Roger Williams, and a few years later, RWU was in a position to create the Rhode Island Oyster Gardening for Restoration and Enhancement program.

The recent *RWU Magazine* feature – “The Oyster is Dead – Long Live the Oyster” – offered the opportunity to check-in with Geraghty, who shares his thoughts here on everything from the early days of marine biology at Roger Williams to the long-term impact of oyster restoration.

On marine biology at Roger Williams in the 1970s...

Obviously we had a lot less as far as facilities go, but the faculty filled any void that might have existed between what was available then and what's available today. It was really exceptional. I had gone to Columbia University, but the experience at Roger Williams was so much more face-to-face, personalized and hands-on. The faculty was totally

engaged. You really felt plugged in, and that was a big motivator to do the best you could do.

On faculty member and mentor Mark Gould...

He was a real thinker. When I say engaged, he really got inside my head. He was challenging. I would do something thinking I did a good job, and he would come back and tell me how to make it better. He expected a lot of people. And he had a pretty quirky personality – he made you feel like he was your buddy, but never so much that you didn't respect him as more than your buddy. He lived what he taught – he was totally passionate about the environment. He was a great role model.

On the applied, hands-on focus of marine biology at Roger Williams...

We spent a lot of time in the field. We would go scour the shoreline right in front of the school. We'd go down to Newport, and go out on the rocks and collect. We had huge collections we had to put together and then identify everything we found in the lab. There was SCUBA diving involved for those who dove. My senior paper had me working out in the field five days a week. It was great.

On a memorable summer experience in marine biology...

Because this was a focused program in marine (more than just a general biology curriculum), when I looked for summer internships or jobs, it gave me a leg up. I worked on Martha's Vineyard at the Westinghouse Ocean Research Lab at the state lobster hatchery. That was a really cool experience. The program was working on a Bureau of Land Management grant, and we were dosing the first four stages of lobster larvae with various doses of hydrocarbons. The goal was to determine whether they were going to lease land on the continental shelf for offshore drilling. I attribute the experience to the background I had at Roger Williams.

On the Lobster Mortarboard Society...

When I contributed to the cost of the Marine and Natural Sciences building expansion, they told me I would get to name the room. It just seemed too weird to name a room after myself, so I tried to think of a way to honor the camaraderie that we felt with our classmates. In 1978, at our graduation, a bunch of us had attached plastic lobsters to our mortarboards to stand out as the marine biology class. We did it to get a chuckle out of our professors and to highlight our marine biology program, which was young at the time. So that was why I named the room in the MNS building the Lobster Mortarboard Society Observation Room.

On oyster gardening in Long Island...

I read an article in the local paper in the late '90s about this Cornell program in Southold on Long Island. It was going to spawn oysters, teach people how to do it and set them up to be oyster gardeners. You would grow them out at your own dock or in their facility in bags, and then at the end of the season you'd bring 50 percent back to Cornell, which they would use to restock areas where the oyster population had been diminished. That was fantastic! We got to learn about the process, it put us out in the field, it was good for the environment and you got a bunch of oysters to eat. A win-win-win. I've been a gardener every since. I just went and collected a bunch of oysters last night that I'm going to serve tonight for dinner as an appetizer.

On the decline of shellfish populations...

The degradation of the local marine environment is pretty evident to anyone who lives near or along the water, due to so many different sources – overfishing, runoff, overdevelopment, bad septic systems. I definitely saw a decline. Even years ago, with family members who were fishermen or clammers – you could see how much harder they had to work to come up with the same catch. We watched the number of baymen in this area decline because it was becoming harder to make a living on the water. You could see eel grass decline, environmental habitat decline... We had a huge industry here until the mid 1980s in scalloping. Then we got hit with brown tide and it wiped it out. So I've been very aware of the degradation of the marine environment.

On the ultimate legacy of oyster gardening projects...

When it comes to my oyster activities, the environment has always been my number one concern. What I have long realized is that when it comes to doing what is right for the environment, you typically encounter two hurdles – the extra time it takes (inconvenience) and cost. As I see it, given the demographics we now have in the U.S., people will take the time and spend the extra money to do what is right for the environment because the link between clean environment, better quality food and good health (longevity) has been made, and people want to live longer and be healthier. So in 20 years, I hope the legacy of programs like oyster gardening will be that the grassroots environmental movement that started in the '60s ultimately saved the planet when people realized that the great food and beverages they enjoyed and needed for healthy diets were dependent on a clean environment.

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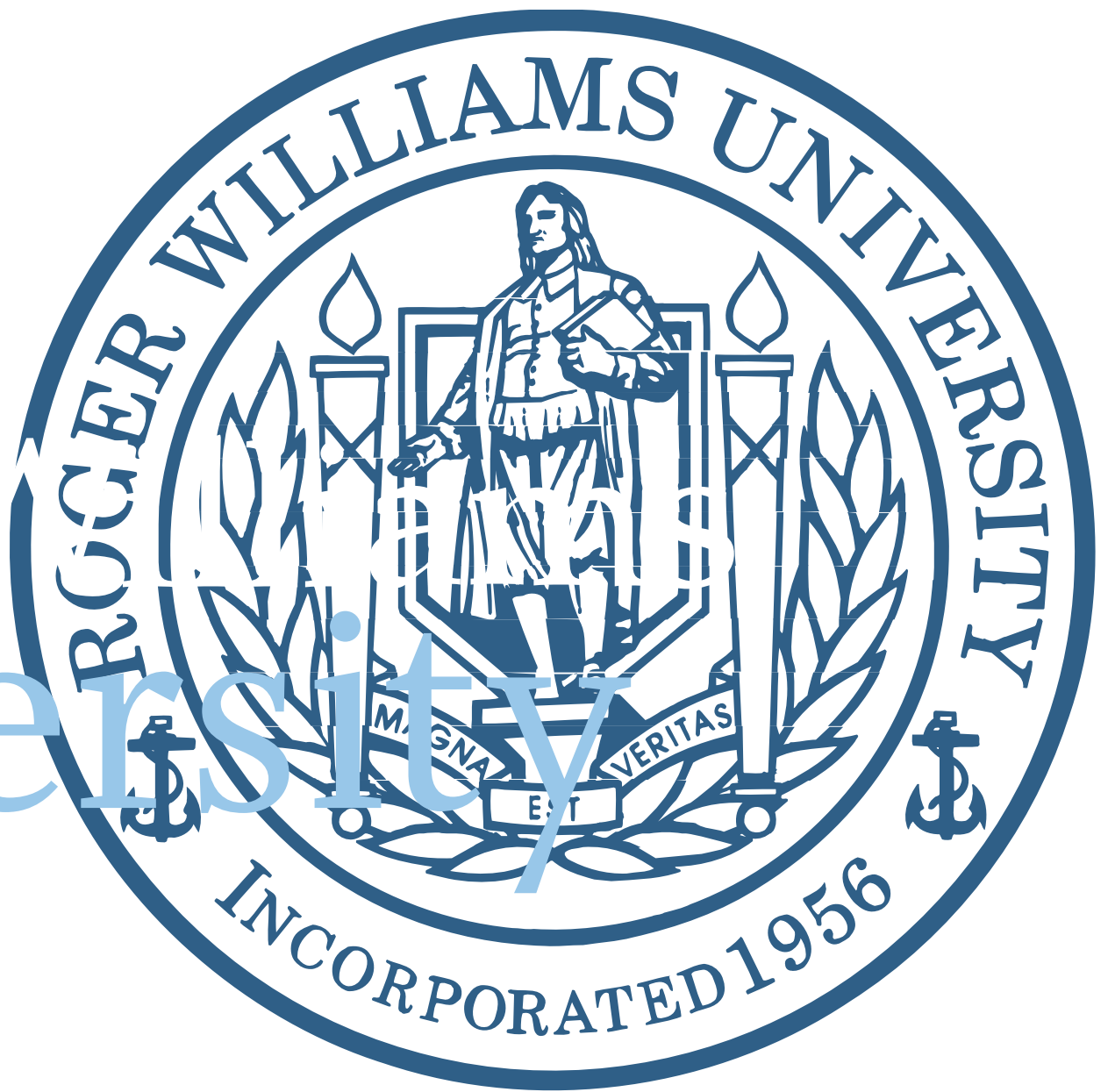
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