

ISLAND PROFILE

A mission for Island preservation



Island Profile | Gordon Gooding

BY CHARITY ROBEY | FEATURE WRITER

After years as the volunteer chairman of the Community Preservation Fund Advisory Board, Gordon Gooding is running for Shelter Island Town Supervisor.

This was not in the cards when he and his wife Kathy moved here full-time a decade ago to do more sailing and spend a few winter weeks in an RV they keep parked in Arizona. Call his campaign Plan B.

"When I go sailing, I always have alternative plans. Stuff happens and you have to have a Plan B," he said. "Six hours to Block Island and six back. Yes, I'd like to go to Block Island, but if that's not going to work, go to Montauk. If all else fails, if it gets too rough, I'll just take it right up on the beach and walk off."

Motivated by the belief that the current Town Board is not doing the job, he decided to get into the November race when it appeared that Republican Amber Brach-Williams, a long-time member of that Board, would run unopposed for supervisor. "I was fearful of where we are going now," Gordon said.

Gerry Siller, the incumbent supervisor, made a game-time decision at the end of January 2023 to run against Gordon, forcing a Democratic primary election, which Gordon won decisively. "I don't believe that the primary vote was about me. It was a reflection on the whole Town Board," he said. "Needless to say, this is not something I ever wanted, to be a politician."

Gordon was born in Queens, the son of a Barbados native whose family owned a sugarcane plantation. His father, Arnott Gooding, came to the U.S. with one of his 12 siblings, married Gordon's mother, moved the family to Southold and had a strained relationship with the family because of his alcoholism. Growing up in Southold, a farming community at the time, Gordon had two sisters, and a pet sheep named Fuzzy. By the time he started high school, the family had moved to East Meadow, Long Island, where he met the person he would marry, Kathleen Bettum. "We've been connected since high school," Gooding said.

After graduating in 1963, Gordon went to Pratt Institute in Brooklyn to study architecture at night while working, and Kathy went to Hofstra. When he was drafted during the Vietnam War, they went to Plan B. "We ran away to get married," he said. "We were at that point," said Kathy.

Alas, it was Thanksgiving weekend, and in Maryland, (where they went looking for an official to marry them) everything was closed. Plan C was deployed: Kathy called her parents, they suggested the couple come home and get married in their back yard the following weekend. The November weather in East Meadow was beautiful.

A week later Gordon reported to Fort Hamilton expecting to be shipped to Vietnam, but was refused for service due to a bleeding ulcer.

At Pratt, he had shifted his course work to construction management, and started working for American Gypsum in the distribution of materials for high-rise buildings. He built a career in the building supply end of the construction business, moving from big companies to smaller companies, and eventually starting his own business. He retired in 2015.

Gordon and Kathy's son, Gordon, lives in Cold Spring Harbor, where he has a psychotherapy practice, and works as a social worker in the local school. He has two daughters in their 20s.

"The way we got to know Shelter Island is through sailing," Gordon said. They sailed their first boat out of Sterling Basin, and sailed it into Coecles Harbor. Their son was six months old. In 1983, they bought a house, which



Gordon Gooding, with Taylor, at home on Shelter Island. CHARITY ROBEY PHOTO

they had rented in the summers while they lived on their boat. Eventually Gordon moved his business to Shelter Island.

"We enjoy being off the grid, like on a boat, living the life by yourself," he said. Gordon took on a volunteer role working for the town on land preservation, and drew on his years of business experience to make the deals happen. "There's nobody working for me, then or now. I was just fascinated with the historical background of people on the Island," he said. "Below-market sales got me involved with all of these people with all of these resources. I tried to stay with the acquisition part of it."

Gordon is not modest about the work he's done with the Preservation Advisory Committee, starting with the creation of access trails and parking for many of the preserved tracts of land, access that was opposed by nearby property owners and initially by members of the Town Board.

During discussions about opening access to the Mildred Flower Hird Nature Preserve, he said a property owner told him not to do it, warning that if he opened up these places, there would be busloads of people coming out from Brooklyn.

"When someone says, you can't do this, those are fighting words for me," Gordon said.

The Town Board worried about the expense of maintaining the Nature Preserve once access was allowed, but with the support of the land's donor, Esther Hunt, and reimbursement of the Town for mowing, the trail was opened, and more trails have followed, including those at Bunker City County Park (Menhaden Lane) and West Neck Preserve.

Recent actions by the Town Board on affordable housing and dealing with wastewater left Gordon disgusted at what he sees as manipulation of public hearings and a "my way, or the highway" attitude. "When people come to the podium, let them say how they feel and thank them for their time. Town officials can't debate the ideas with them or tell them they're wrong," Gordon said. "We have given fodder to some outspoken people. There are extreme views on both sides, and I want us to put people together and find things that we agree on. We all agree on the water. I don't care if it's this sys-

[He'd like to see more open discussion of the most important questions before the Town.](#)

tem or that system, we should be able to look at the facts."

As chairman of the Preservation Advisory Board, Gordon said he was incensed at what he saw as an attempt to label the use of the Klenawicus Airstrip property for wastewater treatment "allowable," because it preserves community character and a statement that the Board would explore what they can and can't do on preserved land. "Donors did not know this was possible. Land donors were calling me and asking, "Are they going to develop our property? That's what got me into the race."

Gordon said he's wary of a Town Board that seems to agree too much, and

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points out that by his count, this Board has voted unanimously every time except once, when the outcome was not in question.

He'd like to see more open discussion of the most important questions before the town.