COMMENTARY

Seizing Last Moments of Summer: Labor Day Traditions

By Sharon Waters

I started going to beach clubs in Sea Bright at 3 months old. I was born in February, and when the season started Memorial Day weekend, my mother hauled my two siblings and me to Sea Bright Bathing Pavilion (now Chapel Beach Club). I couldn't even crawl, but I was there on a beach towel, covered in sunscreen. My mom made going to SBBP a priority, mostly because she wanted to be there—no doubt—but also because she wanted to instill in her children a love of the beach. I never went to camp, and our family didn't take trips in the summer–every day was spent at the beach in Sea Bright, unless it rained.

One of our favorite family traditions happened on Labor Day. Throughout the summer, we'd "eat down" at SBBP for dinner, my mom rushing from the beach to our home in Little Silver to get the food she had already prepared, usually cold fried chicken. But every Labor Day, we ate down at SBBP for breakfast. It was the only time we ate the morning meal at the beach. Our family brought doughnuts, the Penningtons contributed hard rolls and butter (bagels weren't a thing back then) and the Screens served orange juice and coffee. We did this every year, rain or shine, hot or cold. Then we all went to dinner at Briody's in Rumson. Somehow, my mom had everything ready for her three children to start school the next day, even though we'd be out late. Anything to seize more moments of summer.

Labor Day is one of my favorite holidays. It signifies endings—the closing of the beach club was always the end of the summer, despite what the calendar says about autumn starting later in September. Labor Day also denotes beginnings—a new school year, different teachers, fresh chances to be better at a certain subject or sport at school. After I finished college, I tried to maintain that new-start feel of the day after Labor Day. I'm not really into resolutions, but I've made many more on Labor Day than New Year's Eve.

My mother died on Sept. 4, 2022. It was a Sunday, the day before Labor Day. The hardest ending in our family was also the most earth-shifting beginning in our family, especially for my father. As we navigated our grief and made funeral plans, I made sure I got to my current beach club, Ship Ahoy, briefly the next day. I had been to the beach every Labor Day for 55 years at that point. The streak could not be broken. The tradition had to be kept.

This Labor Day, I will order a BEC (bacon, egg, cheese) on a hard roll at the Ship Ahoy snack bar, sit in a rocking chair on the porch and think about my mom. We have all sorts of ways to honor our deceased loved ones, don't we? This is mine.

Sharon Waters is a writer living in Highlands.

From Fish to Farms to Fungi: Why Science Matters

By Emma Scales

Spending every warm day on Sea Bright beaches growing up taught me how to see the whole picture from bits and pieces. It's undoubtedly why I became a scientist. I learned to recognize clams and moon snails from the broken shards of their shells. Bubbles in wet sand meant little wriggling sand crabs were just a few seconds of digging away. I squealed when I saw a rare puff of mist on the horizon, because I knew one of the largest animals on Earth was just below the surface. I learned from a young age how to observe these creatures, not directly, but through the evidence of their presence. As a cellular biologist, this is still how I do my work today.

Now, our ability to investigate and learn from the natural world is in jeopardy. Funding cuts, firings, and politically motivated grant terminations are already disrupting our research, and the White House-requested federal budget would virtually eliminate it. As a federally funded scientist, this terrifies me, and not because I'm afraid of losing my job.

The fungus I study, Rhizopus microsporus, is a common mold that can cause a disease called mucormycosis. While rare, this infection has a mortality rate of over 50% when it spreads throughout the body and is virtually untreatable. Deadly outbreaks of skin-level mucormycosis, can occur after natural disasters (graphic images), including hurricanes. Mucormycosis is on the rise, which is why it is critical we learn more about this cryptic fungus.

Penicillin and other antibiotics were discovered by studying how molds fight with bacteria; my research seeks to uncover new treatments by studying how molds befriend bacteria. Some fungi, like the one I study, even allow bacteria to live inside their cells. The bacteria, in turn, help the mold devastate fields of rice and sunflowers and rot fruits and vegetables.

If I am successful, my work will lead to desperately needed treatments for mucormycosis and possibly for other fungal infections and crop diseases. The federal administration might lead you to believe that medically and agriculturally relevant research like mine won't be disrupted by funding cuts or grant terminations. This is unfortunately not the case.

I conduct research at Cornell University. Recently Cornell informed us that many research grants previously awarded by the National Institute of Health (NIH) and the U.S. Department of Agriculture (USDA) had not been paid by the federal government for several months. My lab is funded by these grants. We currently do not know the fate of our research.

In February, thousands of USDA scientists and employees were illegally fired. I worked with two of these scientists and know them well. They helped me with my research. One studied the plant disease associated with the Irish Potato Famine and was characterizing a particularly dangerous new strain threatening U.S. crops. That lab is closed now.

These are just the cuts that have affected me directly. There are thousands of affected researchers across the country, trying to develop lifesaving medical treatments and solutions to crop diseases that regularly threaten our food supply. Our work has already been interrupted, mostly through unauthorized firings and the withholding of committed funds. The future of science in the United States is severely threatened.

Biological research funding represented less than 1% of the federal budget in 2024 (0.1% for the entire National Science Foundation budget, 0.03% for USDA research, 1% for the entire NIH, including staff salaries). The White House-requested budget would cut this investment by more than half. This is clearly not about cost saving. Taking a lesson from spotting ocean creatures, these hints and clues point to a big picture in which scientific research is no longer valued in our country. This would be disastrous for American medicine, agriculture, and economic development.

These cuts will also hit locally. They threaten to shutter the James Howard Marine Sciences Lab on Sandy Hook, a critical research station for the health of mid-Atlantic fisheries and training ground for NJ students. Fortunately, the Senate Appropriations Committee heard our calls to protect science, and they voted to maintain scientific research funding at 2024 levels. To protect these resources and critical research around the country, I urge you to contact Senators Kim and Booker and tell them to oppose any further cuts to scientific research funding in the final 2026 budget.

You can also get more involved with science locally. Clean Ocean Action, a local nonprofit where I interned, offers education programs, opportunities to conduct citizen science, and Beach Sweeps. The NJ Sea Grant Consortium runs Ocean Fun Days, a free event to introduce children to marine science on Sandy Hook. I invite you to participate in this Science Pledge.

Science exists to improve our quality of life; we would not be here without it. From one loud Jersey kid to another: raise your voice with me to defend it.

Emma Scales is a PhD student in fungal biology at Cornell University

Hurricane Erin Impacts the Jersey Shore

Hurricane Erin reared her head last week along New Jersey's coastline as beachgoers were warned of dangerous riptides. A cruise ship rode out the worst of the storm's effects in New York Harbor. Surfers took to the water off Sandy Hook Friday, Aug. 22, to enjoy the outsized waves.

Photos by Stan Kosinski