

Episode 6: The Rockaway Peninsula

Hosted by Helen Cheng (HC)

***The people in this podcast episode have given their permission to be recorded but are not announced in order to protect their identities.

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The bay. The ocean. The boardwalk. The beach. The Rockaways of New York City. Welcome to Jamaica Bay.

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You're listening to Jamaica Bay, a podcast series bringing you stories of the people that work, live, and play in Jamaica Bay, New York City. I'm your host, Helen Cheng. And I'm from the Science and Resilience Institute at Jamaica Bay and New York Sea Grant.

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On a sunny Saturday, I spent the day in the Rockaways working at a community festival celebrating Earth Day and the environment. Instead of having an information table with pamphlets and papers, I wanted to have a conversation with the people of the Rockaways. From adults to children, each person shared his/her story about what life is like in the Rockaways.

>"We love Far Rockaway. I love the water so I feel like I need to be next to the ocean because the ocean brings like energy and it makes you just feel good and the sand feels great. We go to the beach a lot and take advantage of living next to the beach."

>"I like living close to the beach. I'm a block away from the beach so it's really nice to be able to go to the beach and hang out and you know, the boardwalk is really great. I just like being close to the beach because it's really cool. I mean it's cold in the wintertime, but in the summertime there's always a nice cool breeze and so it's wonderful."

The Rockaways is a peninsula located in the southern part of New York City. Relatively isolated from other urban parts of the city, it is a popular summer retreat. But it's also called home for more than 130,000 residents.

>(HC): "What do you like about the Rockaways?"

"What I like about it is the beach and the park. It's a lot of fun to go to the beach and hang out with my friends and I really love the ocean, and swimming, and stuff."

>"We have the boardwalk so there's new concession stands and kayaking."

(HC) "What do you like to do in the Rockaways? What do you like to do in your free time?"
"During the summer, they have the kayaking so I like to do that. I think they have like yoga and karaoke in Riis Park, Riis Beach, and stuff."

>"My kids joined Aqua 101 and they go surfing. I'm just excited that's why I'm saying that because my kids don't know how to swim but they still went surfing. I was so scared, but they learned how to surf and jump up on the surfboard and surf the waves. They go boating and sailing. I was so surprised and they made video and I just have it like for life, like 'wow, you actually surfed.'"

>"Well, I like that we lived near the beach and I have some friends that live in townhouses, and I'll usually do skateboarding here."

>"There's a lot more grass; that's the reason why I come here. I usually come here for the composting so I'm looking for other things that I can learn, anything that can help me to learn more about the Rockaways, the beach."

>"Well, for me, like before living here, all I knew about Rockaway was the beach; like that's the main attraction; that's all I knew about it. But after living here for just two years, I mean there's a lot more than that. I had no clue that there was so many different neighborhoods connected and there was so many like free events going on and stuff like that. So I always tell people you need to come to the Rockaways in the summer, check out all these events that are happening. I mean like today, look how many people showed up, look how many vendors showed up to like make something happen, you know."

The Rockaways has experienced challenges and still does.

>(HC): "What do you think has been some of the challenges in the Rockaways?"
"Some of the challenges? I know that Rockaway is considered one of the poorest because we lack of lot of things, like we don't have a lot of mental health resources here and we don't have a lot of malls. We don't really have anything, really. It's so secluded."

>"Well I would kinda say it's kinda rough because sometimes everybody wants to pick a fight but I'm not with that so I don't like interfere with that. It's kind of calm, sometimes a little bit of trouble, but I would say, um, it's pretty nice and calm. Some people are nice, some people are kinda of mean and um, yea."

>"When I first came out here, there wasn't a mat for people in a wheelchair to get onto the beach."

>(HC): "Has there been challenges living in the Rockaways?"
"There are challenges probably like - it's more worry. It hasn't really happened except for like Hurricane Sandy and the flooding that exist and I guess they're doing new infrastructure to

make the water reside or go back to the ocean. So that's probably the only challenge.”

(HC): “How does that make you feel?”

“I just hope - I just don't want anything devastating to happen to wipe out the whole area.”

But things are changing for the better.

>“I've been to a number of workshops and they have a lot of, like, they bring a lot of health things up, like health issues that go on here.”

>“I have two friends and are in wheelchairs and now they could get onto the beach.

“Last year I went to the beach and it's the first time I'd ever seen that they have a wheelchair mat so I was very happy about that.”

>“They're building it up and making beautiful parks and making the beaches better and adding more services for the people to enjoy.”

>“In Rockaway, it's a tight knit community, especially when Sandy hit here. I mean it really brought everyone together. Everyone's friendly with me. I like the welcome-ness here”

>“They are all so inviting and the people are inviting and friendly in the Rockaways”

From the people I spoke with, I asked: if someone didn't know anything about the Rockaways and visited for the first time, what would you tell them?

>“I would say that it is noisy but other than that it's really like beautiful because of all the trees that grow here, like all the, like all the flowers and then there's the little yellow flowers that like grow out of the grass; they're really pretty. I would just saying that there's a lot of stores and there's like a lot of restaurants that serve good food and there's a lot of parks that you can go to to just hang out.”

>“Well, we are not part of Brooklyn, we are part of Queens.”

(HC): “That's important.”

“Now the weather's getting nice, they can come and exercise on the boardwalk, go to the beach. I think there's parking restrictions because I guess they feel the tourists maybe make a mess, and so maybe if they could not make a mess “

>“There's a lot that you can do in the Rockaways. Like there's a ferry now - they didn't use to have a ferry and now there's a ferry that goes from Manhattan to the Rockaways, and that's really cool for tourists to do if they want to do that, you know, come visit and see us and go to the beach.”

>“I would describe it as a fast paced city with relaxation areas because it is New York City but it’s also like when you get on the beach and the boardwalk, you kinda just see people strolling, taking their time, so like those are your relaxation points”

>“One of the things that I really enjoy, especially at night, is people have fireplaces and so the smell of the ocean and the fireplaces, you know, just walking by their homes is really nice. I like walking sometimes at night when I'm coming home and it smells really nice.”

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“Because not only the beach also have the bay, so the bay also gives a lot to the community. I think they just take it for granted or when they go, they just see water. I don't know. They don't know everything that water gives to you and life gives to you and how good it makes you feel. It's like a healing. “

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Thanks to the Rockaway Waterfront Alliance for inviting me to their community event and thanks to all the people who shared their stories with me.