

## CHEBEAGUE STEPS UP

On Saturday January 17, amid a heavy snowfall, a small group of Chebeaguers, homemade signs in hand, gathered in front of the island library to protest their displeasure with events in Washington -- a mini-No Kings rally in puffer coats and mittens. They were back the next week in larger numbers.

Every Saturday since then — in rain, wind and summer heat — the demonstrators assemble, now at the intersection of South and Wharf Roads waving as traffic heads toward the 10 a.m. ferry. Although the location — and weather — have changed, the sentiments of 15 to 20 regular sign-holders, joined by a mix of summer visitors, friends, families and pets, have not: American democracy is in jeopardy.



In the beginning, Chebeaguers focused their protests on the aggressive actions of federal immigration agents and the resulting violence. Soon the group, like countless others nationally, expanded its focus, challenging the unchecked powers of the executive branch and erosion of protections guaranteed by the U.S. Constitution.

Those threats have not faded with the passage of time, and neither have the Chebeaguers.

Quite the opposite. Islanders this spring formed a new organization, Chebeague Steps Up. “It’s not enough to stand on the lawn and wave signs,” said Lew Holman, who helped mobilize the first demonstration and remains an unofficial leader of the group. This summer Chebeague Steps Up began hosting guest speakers at its monthly meetings at the Chebeague Community Church Parish House. The public is welcome and audiences number between 30 and 40 people.



The speakers have included retired Maine Supreme Court Justice Mark Horton, immigration attorney Kate Drabecki, former State Sen. Dick Woodbury, historian Jerry Wiles, and physician and public health expert Eric Bass. The common message of the speakers: “Get off the couch and do something.” Islander Gail Errera was there at the snowy beginning, motivated, she said, by none other than Jane Fonda. Fonda was a guest on Stephen Colbert’s late-night talk show (a winning raffle ticket put Errera in the audience).

The actress/activist walked onstage wearing a t-shirt emblazoned “Resist.” An idea was born. Soon Errera had launched a new business, selling shirts proclaiming, “Democracy: Love it or Lose It.” Demand is high and Errera has donated proceeds from the sales to organizations that Chebeague Steps Up wants to support, including the Immigration Legal Advocacy Project in Portland and Maine Immigrant Rights Coalition.

While members of the group share common goals now, they didn’t arrive there via the same route. Kevin Paradise was a long-time Republican who has grown increasingly unhappy with the direction his party has taken. Before he retired, Paradise traveled globally for business. “The U.S. was held in high regard everywhere I went,” he explained. “That’s gone now. There’s a loss of trust.”



Paradise worries that in national politics, partisan lines are “solidly drawn.” Differing opinions are no longer tolerated and the flow of information highly politicized.

The fact that islanders are willing to engage and act “soothes the soul,” he said. Paradise and his wife Alison have been active members of the organization from its earliest days.

John Rent and his wife, Sharon, also showed up for the first event and are regulars on Saturdays and at the monthly discussions. Reaction from fellow islanders, even those who disagree, have largely been polite, says John Rent. If the group succeeds in encouraging dialogue and engagement despite partisan differences, he believes an important goal will be achieved. And, Rent hopes, the group’s high-profile presence will motivate people to vote.

The Chebeague group is one of several similar organizations on Maine islands, including Defending Democracy on nearby Peaks Island and Just the Facts on Vinalhaven.

Is Chebeague Steps Up changing minds in this politically divisive climate? “There’s no real way to answer that” admits Holman. He’s encouraged by the attendance at meetings and discussions that follow. The group’s September 21 meeting will feature guest speaker Pips Veazey, director of the University of Maine’s Portland Gateway, whose topic will be “Fostering Connections in Challenging Times.”

For Gail Errera, the fact that the group has attracted people of differing views to its programs is encouraging. “Everyone on this island is not on the same page,” she said. “But we’re a community and we need to listen to each other. I think we’re all learning something from this.”

At 10 a.m. Saturday (August 29) the Chebeague community is invited to help plan the future for the organization. The meeting will be held on the Houghton lawn at South and Wharf Roads. For more information contact: [Chebeaguestepsup1@gmail.com](mailto:Chebeaguestepsup1@gmail.com)