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Community , Living , News , Siesta Key News June 29, 2023

Community Spotlight: Not a mad scientist, a happy one

Author: **John Morton**

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Dave Vozzolo is enjoying the water in more ways than one during his retirement

By John Morton

Q: You have joined the ranks of the “citizen scientists” that help with the restoration efforts of Siesta Key’s Grand Canal, upon which you live. How did you get involved? And please describe your duties.

A: I still chuckle when I hear the term “citizen scientist,” but it really is an accurate way to describe our team. None of us working on the canal project have any professional background or technical training in water-quality issues, and we certainly are not water biologists or “scientists.” We are a group of concerned and engaged citizens who are learning as we go, and trying to do the right thing for our environment and our community.



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Phil Chiocchio (left) and Dave Vozzolo, two of Siesta Key's "citizen scientists." (submitted photo)

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and other technologies to improve water quality and to increase marine life on the canal system. We have received great support and invaluable education from organizations such as Mote Marine, Sarasota Bay Estuary Program, Suncoast Waterkeepers and others, as well as partners doing similar projects in Venice and Anna Maria Island.

We worked hard to encourage neighbors to purchase and install mini-reefs under their docks. We also realized early on that we needed to address the science – are we really improving water quality and increasing marine life? We began using borrowed equipment to test and measure elements of water quality in the canal, and Phil used his experience to produce underwater videos illustrating fish and marine life in the canal and around the mini-reefs. Fortunately, we’ve been joined by our neighbor Kent Larson, who brought his professional experience working with complex lab and testing equipment (but not water testing) and in database development. With the support of the Siesta Key Association, we have been able to purchase our own testing and video equipment. I’m very excited that we have recently been joined by a small group of committed neighborhood volunteers who are helping immensely as we implement a regularly scheduled program of water testing and video monitoring at selected sites within our canal system.

Yay! More citizen scientists! We are very excited to report that we will soon have nearly 500 mini-reefs installed on Siesta Key!



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Q: You are an avid kayaking enthusiast, and your vessel often plays a role in your water-testing efforts. Tell us how the kayak is helpful.

A: I used my kayak quite a bit as we were building an inventory and mapping of the docks and waterways along the canal system, particularly in the early days of the project. I believe that I’ve kayaked the entire 9 miles of the canal as it winds its way around the Village and the beach, and most people don’t realize that there are nearly 900 docks on the canal. I was on my kayak often for our early water testing, and I must admit it was challenging to use the testing equipment and record the results while on the kayak. I must have looked pretty funny out on the water. My wife and others did later join in to help recording the data while I used the equipment. But the early days were quite an adventure.

We now don’t use the kayaks much for water testing or video monitoring, but they are still a useful way to get around some areas of the canal and to inspect equipment, etc. My wife and I just love getting out on the water. I’ve really come to appreciate what an invaluable asset and resource that the canal is for all of us – whether you live directly on it or not.

Q: You are retired from a successful career in assorted planning services. Please share a little of that history. And is your interest with the canal project a natural extension of that?

A: I graduated in the mid-1970s with a degree in urban design and environmental studies from one of the early collegiate environmental programs in the country. I then earned a masters degree in city and regional planning from the University of North Carolina. I’m recently retired from a 40-plus-year career in transportation planning and project development, working within the local and federal government as well as for private contractors with a focus on public transit infrastructure and systems across the U.S and Canada. I’ve managed many planning, engineering and environmental projects throughout my career, but I was never the technical “scientist” completing environmental testing or analysis. That was always the job of somebody else. And, my career focus has been on transportation and particularly public transit.

So, water-quality science and testing are a whole new world for me. But I really have enjoyed learning and getting exposed to the critically important area of water quality, critical particularly for those of us living in Florida. I never imagined that in my retirement I’d be learning about dissolved oxygen, phosphates and nitrates – oh my!

So, it is true that my interest in the canal project is in some ways an extension of my background in planning and the environment. But my primary motivation has been as a concerned citizen and homeowner who lives on the canal on Siesta Key. I have long seen our canal system and waterways in general as a very important component of our very special life here on Siesta Key. I’ve also personally witnessed the serious decline in the quality of the water and the extent of marine life on the canal system. For example, only a few years ago we would sit on our dock and see dozens of mullet jumping in the

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the sun and the sights. After a few more visits with our family, we decided to buy a rental and vacation condo on the mainland just over the south bridge, and we would visit Sarasota and Siesta Key a couple times a year. In 2012, Ann and I and one of our sons permanently relocated here and lived in our condo until we moved into our current home near Siesta Key Village in 2013. I was still working but that was not an issue – and very happy to say that I was able to retire in 2020.

Ann and I absolutely love our neighborhood near the Village, and have formed a great tight-knit group of neighbors and friends who all love taking in the amazing local music scene on the Key. We’re about a 12-minute walk to the Village as well as a 12-minute walk to the beach – pretty much an ideal outdoor and walkable lifestyle.

We understand and agree with the growing frustrations and concerns about the increasing over-development of Siesta Key. We’ve seen the changes even since our introduction to the area in 2003, and we really sympathize with our friends who are long-time and, some even lifetime, residents. The change has got to be shocking for long-timers. I do hope that more of our citizens, visitors and elected officials can respect the fact that this is a fragile barrier island environment and it really cannot safely accommodate any more growth. Enough is enough.

Q: Name your three top spots, and why, when it comes to kayaking around our island.

A: While the mangrove tunnels on South Lido Key are more well known and larger, we enjoy kayaking the small mangrove tunnel area that is on Siesta Key off Roberts Bay just south of the entrance to the Grand Canal system (on the bay side of Tropical Circle). I must admit that I’m reluctant to mention this site, because not too many people seem to know about it. But once you leave the Bay and work your way through the mangrove tunnels, you really feel like you are in the middle of a secluded, quiet spot. We also enjoy kayaking north on the bay from the entrance to the Grand Canal system and through the bayou between Roberts Point Road and Flamingo Avenue and under the hump bridge on Siesta Drive to where the bayou joins Big Pass. I believe the area is called Fishery Point. It is quite beautiful and a fun kayak trip. During low tide, we usually pull up the kayaks to one of the sandbar islands that are created in Big Pass. It’s a beautiful place to take a stretch break after the long kayak ride and to walk in the water. One of our favorite activities is to go out kayaking with a group of friends on the evening of a full moon. About six to eight of us will kayak along the canal in the early evening, arriving into Sarasota Bay at about the time when the sun is setting behind us and the full moon is rising directly in front of us. It really is magical just sitting out there in the middle of the bay, and then kayaking back home along the canal lit spectacularly by the full moon. It is breathtaking and I highly recommend it!



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Tags: **Community Spotlight, Dave Vozzolo, Grand Canal Regeneration Project, Jean Cannon, Phil Chiocchio, Siesta Key Association**

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