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SPECIAL REPORT

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PHOTO BY TJ FIGNARRO; BEACH PHOTO © JEFFREY M. FRANK/SHUTTERSTOCK.COM

Lake Erie has no better friend than Sharen Trembath. Each year this environmental dynamo assembles hundreds of volunteers to clean the beaches she loves.

What she found in Lake Erie inspired this woman to launch a local environmental overhaul.

BY CHARITY VOGEL

**F**OR SHAREN TREMBATH, the revelation came one Easter Sunday.

As was their usual custom, the Trembath family—Sharen, her husband, Jim, and their three children, Jenna, Jim Jr., and Jeff—were taking a walk down the sandy beach of Lake Erie near their home in Angola, New York.

Sharen spotted it first: a dialysis bag. A trained medical assistant, the then-40-year-old mom knew what she was seeing bobbing in the rippling waves that brushed the pebbly shoreline.

Seeing medical waste on the beach bothered Sharen. But what frustrated her even more was the fact that the bag was not the first one she had seen in walks with her kids along Lake Erie.

“I had already found 19 bags. The 20th was the one that pushed me over the edge,” recalls Sharen, now 66, her blue-green eyes alive at the memory.

“All the tubes were there on that







# Clean Sweep

bag—everything. And I was mad. I kicked the bag into the water. My son said, ‘Mom, what are you doing?’ I said, ‘Nobody cares.’ And he said, ‘We do.’”

That moment, in the spring of 1985, changed Sharen’s life. It certainly changed her community in upstate New York. It also changed the health and cleanliness of this corner of the Great Lakes region.

## God So Loved the World

The story of how a dirty dialysis bag sent Sharen into a righteous indignation—and into the dedicated pursuit of cleaning garbage off Lake Erie’s beaches—is an involved one. To cut right to the point, though, consider this:

Each autumn for the past 26 years, in one massive effort on a Saturday morning, Sharen and an army of more than 2,000 volunteers, as part of the “Great Lakes Beach Sweep,” have scoured thousands of pounds of trash off 95 miles of coastline along the

shore of Lake Erie, a swath stretching from Presque Isle to Niagara Falls.

Sharen serves as Lake Erie coordinator for the event, which is organized in New York by the American Littoral Society and is part of the Ocean Conservancy’s International Coastal Cleanup. In 2010 alone, Sharen’s team helped New York volunteers collect 186,000 pounds of garbage off the state’s beaches.

Sharen sees her effort—which is both exhausting and exhilarating—as a natural outgrowth of the Catholic faith she has nurtured throughout her life.

“I believe there is a correlation between faith and the environment,” she says. “I am a very strong believer. And if you believe in God, you have to believe that God made the earth. It’s a connection between us, God, and everything around us.”

If you ask Sharen, that means we all have a responsibility to pitch in and keep the world clean.

“We need to protect what we have here,” she says.

## ‘A Woman of Faith’

After finding the dialysis bag on the beach with her son, Sharen took it to work at the cancer-focused health-care facility in Buffalo where she was employed at the time and made dozens of photocopies of the item.

“I was so mad,” remembers the petite blonde. “I showed it to everyone.”

Sharen’s indignation may have surprised some, but it came as no shock to her family. They had gotten used to her passion for causes that related to the world around her.

Born in 1945, the former Sharen Greenwood grew up on the same street in Angola where she would later live after marrying her schoolmate Jim Trembath in 1968, in a ceremony at nearby St. Vincent’s Church.

The biggest test to Sharen’s faith had





Over the years, volunteers have removed and recorded everything from medical waste to party balloons, Styrofoam containers, plastic detergent bottles, and tires.

come shortly before that point, in 1966. Then, as a young woman, she had watched her fiancé being sent overseas to Vietnam as a combat paratrooper. Jim was shot and badly wounded when jumping from a plane. It took weeks before Sharen and Jim's family knew whether he would survive his injuries.

Jim gradually recovered. When Sharen recalls the time now, she remembers the countless prayers she said for him: rosaries and novenas squeezed into every spare moment at work and home.

"That was the most my faith was ever tested," she says. "Every day I would go to the [hospital] chapel and pray that he would be OK. Every day."

Despite living on one small swath of beachside roadway her entire life—or maybe because of it—Sharen grew into a wife and mother with deep concerns about the environment. She studied issues including phosphates in household products and their impact on water supplies; she protested the release of balloons at weddings and kids' events, calling them hazards to wildlife and a blight on beaches.

"She is a woman of faith, and her passion is the Great Lakes," says Jim Jr., 37, Sharen's middle child.

Sharen mailed her photocopies to elected leaders and soon started receiving phone calls from public officials, environmental activists, and nature groups. They encouraged her sense of outrage and gave her an idea. Inspired, she knew she had found her calling: she would clean as much of Lake Erie's coast as she could.

Behind Sharen's goal stood the firm idea that cleaning up coastline was her simple way—not unlike one of the "little ways" of St. Thérèse of Lisieux—of showing God respect for creation.

"How can you *not* walk in nature and think about the God who made it?" she asks. "How can you look at nature and not believe that something created it—and us?"

#### Trash Talk

The first year, the Trembath family staged their own cleanup, picking up garbage along one mile of shoreline—



PHOTOS BY TJ PIGNATARO

## How Can St. Anthony Help You?



Can we light a candle for you at the National Shrine of St. Anthony in Cincinnati? Join our community of prayer at [www.stanthony.org](http://www.stanthony.org). Light a candle, post your special intention, pray for others or make a gift supporting the Friars' work among the poor.

### FRIARWORKS

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the stretch of beach right outside their door.

They cleaned up medical waste, balloons, Styrofoam containers, plastic detergent bottles, and old tires.

"It was windy, it was rainy, it was cold," recalls Jim Jr. of that first cleanup. "We went as far as we could. There were 10 people out there, maybe just the family. But that's what we did."

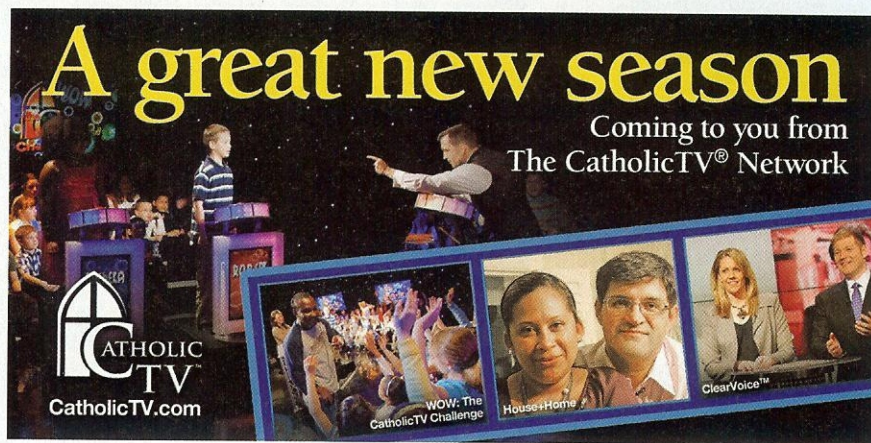
At first her effort garnered little attention. But Sharen began to talk about the cleanup around town, to Scout troops, school classrooms, and community groups. By her second year, there were dozens of volunteers helping her on the cleanup. In one early sweep alone, volunteers collected 136 tires.

Soon, Sharen had hundreds of volunteers each fall for the annual Saturday-morning event. Now, as coordinator for the Lake Erie event, Sharen oversees a group that has grown to more than 2,600 people in some years.

In 2011, she scaled back her own personal cleanup effort on the beach, reducing from 95 miles the stretch that she oversees. But she still runs the Lake Erie effort and manages the cleanup on dozens of miles of shorefront.

"I believe in what she is doing," says Eileen McKenna, an Amherst resident who has turned out for the beach sweep for years. "It's her enthusiasm. She's enthusiastic and committed to her beliefs."

Volunteers for the beach sweep turn out first thing in the morning on the day of the event. They receive plastic



trash bags, work gloves, and paper forms that list types of litter by category. During the sweep, volunteers not only pick up trash, but also keep a log of what they find on the beaches. Those logs are then tallied from across the state, giving an annual picture of how much litter—and what type—is plucked from Great Lakes coastlines each fall.

Sharen sees the secret to her success in her friendly approach: the sweeps always end with hot-dog cookouts for volunteers.

"The response has always been, 'Two hours, once a year? I can do that!'" Sharen says. "Who can say no?"

Jim Sr. credits Sharen's attitude with the success of her environmental cause.

"Sharen is always positive," he says about his wife of 43 years.

### Just a Day at the Beach

Sharen has been honored many times for her work by elected leaders and

community groups. Local media have crowned her the "Beach Queen" of Western New York. Former Governor Mario Cuomo congratulated her on her work during his tenure in office—and took a "Beach Sweep" T-shirt in return.

It's been a long, strange adventure, but every year, the litter is back on the beaches, and there's more work to do.

Looking back, Sharen, who is now retired from her career and has three grandchildren, says she may have been too daunted to begin if she had known what the beach sweep would grow into.

After all, Sharen points out, she has done all this with no funding, no grant money, no salary.

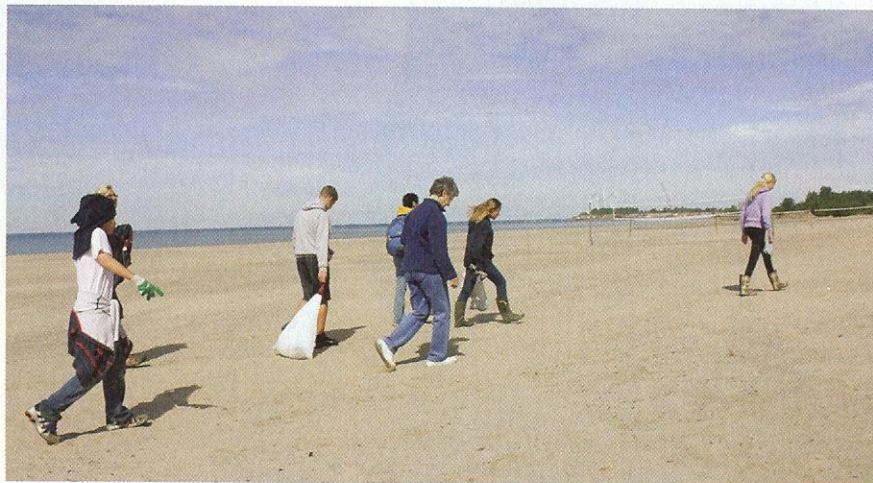
"If you had told me I'd clean up 95 miles of shoreline for 25 years, I'd never believe it," she reflects.

But a key lesson about "saving the world," as Sharen and her family have learned, is that even a once-per-year effort—when multiplied by the energy of 2,000 or more people—can make for real change.

And for Sharen, all that time spent stooping down to pick up litter has not been in vain.

"I tend to pray best now," she says, "as I take my walks on the beach." **A**

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Under Trembath's leadership, volunteers give the Lake Erie beaches a much-needed facelift.

**WEBPLUS** To learn more about the Great Lakes Beach Sweep, visit [AmericanCatholic.org/WebPlus](http://AmericanCatholic.org/WebPlus).