

ROCKHOOUNDING AT ORIENT'S PUBLIC BEACH

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As youngsters, many of us learned to swim because it was fun. The fact that this skill might help us to save our lives at some fateful moment is an afterthought. Working from this premise, a combination of not for profit groups headquartered on Long Island's north fork conduct summertime parent-child earth-science, archaeological, and astronomical programs. Since the north fork is a haven for retired professionals, it's not surprising that the instructors were leaders in their fields. And since many are grandparents, their mellowed and jovial approach provides a pressure free atmosphere for questions, show and tell, and "war stories."

Custer Planetarium on Bayview Avenue, Southold, faces the New York State Archaeological Society's Indian Museum. In keeping with its earth and space science mission of amateur inquiry and in deference to its archaeological neighbor which houses a spectacular array of local and national arrow heads, each summer Custer offers at a nominal fee a ten lesson earth science program. The course is conducted by Ted Fredericks, retired mineralogist, advisor to the Suffolk County Gem & Mineral Society, and founder of the Long Island Mineral and Geology Society. In a gentle fashion, he introduces young children and their parents to the periodic table, to trigonometry, to crystal shapes, to fossils and arrow heads, to plate tectonics, to pleistocene geology, and to mineral identification.

His use of fluorescent lamps and wooden blocks that mimic crystal shapes is particularly exciting and appeals to the tactile, show me nature of children. Taking into account financial and logistical constraints as well as the possibility that mothers will have younger children even toddlers in tow, he caps off his program with a Saturday field trip to the public beach at Orient Point. Equipped with trowels, hammers, glasses, and baggies, the participants scour the pebble strewn shoreline for eye catching specimens. Although quartz and granite are the most common finds, everyone secretly hopes to find an arrow head.

The youngsters and their parents come away from the program with a love for nature and a respect for its conservation, an appreciation of the beauty and mathematical proportion of crystals, a smattering of knowledge about the periodic table and plate tectonics. More importantly, both youngsters and parents learn that modern man's understanding of and use of rocks and minerals is central to the development of our industrialized and computerized society and material culture. Most importantly, the youngsters learn that their mastery of high school regents math and science courses are important to their future careers particularly if they entertain careers in material science and geology and for their development regardless of their career pathways as good citizens ever mindful of natural conservation in this great republic.