



Staten Island Advance

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Staten Island celebrates its 350th birthday

By RYAN LAVIS

As a third generation Staten Islander from West Brighton, Beverly Neuhaus has seen many changes come to her beloved borough.

From the construction of the Verrazano-Narrows Bridge in 1964, to the building up of the St. George Esplanade, Ms. Neuhaus said the Island is obviously a much bigger place than the one she grew up in.

But at Staten Island's 350th birthday bash held yesterday at the St. George Plaza, Ms. Neuhaus said the Island has retained the smalltown charm she remembered as a child.

"There are half a million people living here now," Ms. Neuhaus said, "but seeing Staten Islanders come out and celebrate its birthday together really gives me a feeling that I still know my neighbors."

Ms. Neuhaus, along with many other Islanders, came out for a night filled with live music, dancing, cake and celebration. The Native American drum and dance troupe, Red Storm, delighted the crowd with its music. While a four-tiered cake colored blue, white and orange — the official colors of Staten Island — fed nearly everyone there. And the cake wasn't the only thing decorated in Staten Island colors: The Empire State Building also showed some Staten Island pride, as it was bright with the borough's colors for the night.

A host of politicians was also present, including Mayor Bloomberg, who had met with Staten Island Chamber of Commerce board members earlier in the day.

Before Hizzoner cut the cake with Borough President James Molinaro and several other politicians, he reminded Staten Islanders of some of the people and achievements that have made this borough famous: The late, great Sen. John Marchi. The invention of chewing gum. The Wu-Tang Clan.

Bloomberg also provided the crowd with a brief history lesson on their borough. He began in 1661 when the Dutch settled here, and continued onto when the Verrazano-Narrows Bridge was completed in 1964.

And then the mayor told everyone about an event on Staten Island in 2009, which he considered a "seminal moment in American politics."

"That was the year that a groundhog named Chuck bit the finger of the mayor of the city of New York," he said, drawing laughs and applause from the hundreds in attendance.

While the mayor's take on history brought some laughs, others such as Lori Weintrob, a history professor at Wagner College and committee member of SI 350 — the organization that set up the birthday party — said it was important that Staten Islanders know some facts about their borough.

"Every street, park and neighborhood in this borough has a history," Ms. Weintrob said. "And hopefully having a birthday celebration like this gets people thinking about that."

And at least for Ms. Neuhaus, whose family settled on Staten Island in 1857, the borough's 350th birthday gave her an opportunity to reflect on the many historical and personal events that have occurred during her life here.

She reminisced about the opening of the Verrazano-Narrows Bridge, as she griped that Staten Island was never the same after, but also admitted that it led to progress for the borough. Ms. Neuhaus also said she remembered taking “typical Sunday Staten Island drives” with her family — traveling to places such as the Conference House and the St. George waterfront, long before its development. “My roots go so deep on this Island and I have so many good memories here,” Ms. Neuhaus said. “That’s why I like seeing people out here celebrating its history.”