

A Day On The Water For Warriors

Story and Photos By Mike O'Brien

Manny Pina is an adventurous guy. During the winter months, he works as a ski instructor near his home in Pennsylvania. His plans for the near future include becoming a certified scuba diver. The fact that he has one leg has no effect on these activities.

"Just because I lost a leg, it doesn't mean it's the end of the world," he shrugged.

A retired Army specialist, Pina lost his left leg in a motorcycle accident about a year after he returned from Iraq. He was introduced to skiing and scuba diving through the Wounded Warrior Disabled Sports Project, a partnership between the Wounded Warrior Project and Disabled Sports USA that provides athletic programs to severely wounded service members.

This weekend, retired Belle Harbor firefighter Flip Mullen and the Graybeards brought WWDSP to the Rockaways for the fifth annual Adaptive Water Sports Festival, where Pina and 38 other veterans had the chance to fish, sail, kayak, scuba dive and water ski at the Rockaway Point Yacht Club.

Wounded Warrior Project Deputy Executive Director Al Giordano, a former Marine and one of the organization's founders, said these sports programs keep the veterans' morale up and improve their confidence, while also keeping the community involved. The adaptive water sports festival was made possible by the many local volunteers who did everything from driving vans to inviting the wounded warriors to stay in their homes for the weekend.

"The government's not good at the warm fuzzies; that's what the community is for," Giordano said. "[Rockaway] is a patriotic community. This is a community that observed great loss on 9/11 and know young women and men who continued the fight that started out that day. They consider these guys and gals family. The outlying warmth and hospitality — I just can't say enough about it."

