Fearless Women of OLAUG: Cleaning Up Cape Cod's Underwater World

Airdate: September 28, 2024

Guest: Susan Baur, Jean Familant, Mary Grauerholz

Resources: olaug-ma.com - Old Ladies Against Underwater Garbage

Susan Baur: 0:30

Look into aging with a fierce attitude rather than with a fearful attitude. I hope our name suggests that we are fierce and fearless and face age that way and face 10 pound anchors that way and lead pipes that way.

David Lowry: 0:47

Hello everybody and welcome to Peaceful Life Radio. I'm David Lowry, and you just heard from Susan Baur. She's with a group known as OLAUG, which is this is their name. I'm not calling them Old ladies, but they call'em Old Ladies Against Underwater Garbage. And I absolutely think you're going to adore our guest today. It's really good. My good friend Don is with me today. Don, how are you doing?

Don Drew: 1:11

Great David, and I'm especially excited about today's program because I had the opportunity of traveling to Cape Cod, Massachusetts and seeing our guests in action. Susan Baur didn't set out to launch a movement. She simply loved ponds. In fact, she once navigated them by their trash, bottles, cans, and floating balls, were like markers on a map, helping her know where she was underwater. Over the years, she tried different ways to help her beloved ponds, but most efforts fizzled. What didn't fizzle was picking up garbage, the one thing she could do without a permit, a plan, or anyone's approval. From that modest beginning grew OLAUG, Old Ladies against Underwater Garbage. A group that's equal parts swim club, mischief, and environmental caretaking. Their work isn't about reports, grants, or press releases. It's about donning goggles, diving down and yanking junk off the bottom of ponds. Susan and her fellow OLAUGers aren't motivated by guilt or duty. If

anything, they admit to being a little addicted to the strange pleasure of removing trash from underwater. What started as Susan's constellation prize has become a source of joy, community, and purpose at a reminder that small, quirky acts of care can be just as powerful as grand gestures Today, we have the good fortune of welcoming, not only Susan, but also two of her OLAUG partners in crime, Mary Grauerholz, and Jean Familant. Friends, welcome to Peaceful Life Radio.

Susan Baur: 2:38

Thank you.

Don Drew: 2:39

Susan, you once navigated ponds by their trash things like bottles and balls were your underwater landmarks. How did those markers turn into a mission?

Susan Baur: 2:50

As you said in the introduction, I failed to get towns to put signs up saying, please don't run your dog through the weed, which is the nursery for small fish and turtles. I didn't get, any help in trying to keep a portion of each pond, away from people and safe for the ecosystem. So at one point when I was swimming around, I saw an extra beer can and a cell phone and, various articles of clothing, and I thought, Well, this is one thing I can do. And I never had any inkling it would grow. It was just something I could do. And we became the old ladies against underwater garbage, and now we do 20 ponds a season, and we take out often between one and 200 pounds of trash every dive.

David Lowry: 3:43

Wow! That's a lot of garbage to be picking up! You call trash picking your constellation prize. How did you decide that those small acts would succeed where your bigger plans didn't?

Susan Baur: 3:55

I didn't have any idea whether it would succeed or not because it really wasn't a project. It was carried along by the enthusiasm of people like Mary and Jean, who once they joined,

once they started, and Mary was one of the very first people to do it with me. She had been doing it herself as she swam. She would pick up lures and beer cans and golf balls. And it is amazing the amount of trash you can stick inside a bathing suit. And then you get back on the beach and now come the golf balls and the lures and everything else.

Don Drew: 4:28

Mary, were you swimming at the same time? How did you start?

Mary Grauerholz: 4:32

I started picking up trash pretty casually when I would swim. My husband and I live directly on a really nice swimming pond. And I would just do that. I would swim over the, beer cans and fishing lures and pick them up. Like Susan said, put them in my swimsuit and then dump it out, when I came back to shore. But jump to the time that I met Susan. I left our house and there's this very small beach next to our house and I looked over and I saw two women swimming together and they were getting ready to get in the water and they obviously knew what they were doing, and I got the impression that they were gonna be picking up trash. So I walked over. We all started talking, and it just went on from there. Susan had already been doing trash picking up and she asked if I wanted to join them. And I said, sure. From there, the three of us met two other women on another pond, and the five of us got started with it. Then people like Jean, ended up joining us. So it started as a small but really dedicated effort. We all got bitten by the bug. It felt hypnotic and very entrancing.

Don Drew: 5:48

Jean, what's your story?

Mary Grauerholz: 5:49

Two of my good friends are both swimmers and I've been swimming with them for a while. And they mentioned to me last year, that I should try out for the group that they're working with. And they told me OLAUG and we all laughed about that. And I went to try out and Susan presented me with my Hat and I was excited to be one of the team as a swimmer. And most swimmers feel the same way. It's a very independent sport. Every morning I go out and I swim around my pond and I come back. I am alone. And when you have the

opportunity to swim on a team and to make your environment cleaner and safer, it's really a slam dunk. I love swimming and I love distance swimming. And the combination of being with this remarkable group of women who we all share that in common, which is once again, an odd thing to share in common with a group of people. And the trash that we find is comical and you have to have a good sense of humor because that's what it's all about. And we're cleaning trash out of a pond. And how happy could we be?

David Lowry: 6:56

I'm listening to this and getting a big smile on my face as I look at you three women, and thinking about you doing your swim, doing a little dive under, and pulling up all kinds of things.

Don Drew: 7:07

You should see'em. They're having a great time, but they're very serious about what they do and getting organized and it's really something to watch. Jean, You mentioned the tryouts. Can one of you say something about the tryout? What does that consist of?

Jean Familant: 7:19

So you have to be able to swim a half a mile under 30 minutes. You have to be able to dive in the water with a snorkel and a mask and come up again, to retrieve and to lift things. Sometimes you're lifting things over your head. And when we do that, we'll work in a team to bring something to the surface and onto the kayak, which is a very difficult time because all of a sudden you realize, as Susan Baur has said, there's nothing that three women together cannot accomplish. And that's really what we do. And we're not just proud of it, but we feel energized by it. We're cleaning this environment for the sea life and for ourselves.

David Lowry: 7:58

You mentioned lures and things like that and of course cans. I think I could probably do that. But you ladies sound like you go for the tougher things as well. What are some of the bigger things that you've retrieved from your ponds?

Susan Baur: 8:09

The toilet, the back of the Corvette.

David Lowry: 8:12

Oh, no, seriously.

Susan Baur: 8:14

Last Monday I was diving to 12 feet and I got a roll of wire that was probably well over a hundred feet long. Just coils and coils of wire. We also got a 10 pound anchor. When you put an anchor up on a kayak, or when three women lift a tractor tire and the kayak skewers through the tire, the kayak then becomes very unstable. So it's a very tough job for the kayakers as well as for the swimmers to get hundreds of pounds of trash. Off the bottom of the pond.

Don Drew: 8:46

Did I hear you say a Corvette? Did I misunderstand that?

Susan Baur: 8:50

Yeah. That was the backend of a 1996 yellow Corvette. Very often when something is very heavy, for example, the toilet, we had to lasso the tank. We made a lasso with rope, and one person heaved it out of the mud so that we could slip the lasso around it. And then we handed the end of the rope to a kayaker. All the swimmers got on one side of the boat. Kayaker lifted the toilet, maybe three feet off the bottom, and then I yelled, kick, and everybody kicked, chug, chug, chug, chug, chug, chug, chug. And we kicked it into shallow enough water. Very often, something like a toilet, the Corvette, very big tires, we an 18 foot piece of stainless steel dock, we can't get those on a kayak and we can't carry them through the water. But what we can do is bump'em along the bottom. So someone dives down, moves the bottom three feet towards the shore. We do that four or five times, and then the tallest ones of us can stand up and we at least get it out of the pond.

David Lowry: 9:57

Don, I think you've made a visit out to the Cape and saw them in action. Describe what you were seeing when you went out there and visited that day?

Don Drew: 10:05

It was quite an event. I wanna say there seemed like there was about 30 people there, but some were supporters, some were kayakers, and so on. It was just amazing to watch them work because on the one hand it appeared to me, to be very organized, and yet at the same time having a blast. It just looked like a great time.

Susan Baur: 10:21

Mary, why don't you talk about the scouting, because all of this stuff begins with scouting. We don't just go to a pond.

Mary Grauerholz: 10:28

It's so important to scout the pond so that we know that when we get this group organized which is not the easiest getting everybody coordinated, but we have to scout just to make sure it's not gonna be all in vain. So two to three maybe of us will go into a pond and look at a limited amount of the pond floor and the water and see what we can find.

Susan Baur: 10:54

The next thing you wanna do is to find homeowners or a pond association, because we want involve the community. We don't wanna just zip in at six o'clock in the morning, remove the garbage, steal away in the night, and have nobody know what we've done. So, we reach out to homeowners associations and ask them to provide a kayaker and to provide our payment. And we are often asked, how much is this gonna cost us? And it costs you cookies. Our entire economy is based on homemade cookies. And so they provide a hot drink, because we get very cold after 60, 90 minutes in the water, and they provide cookies. And then once we've got a pond with trash and a homeowner's association with cookies, then Jean, you tell what the dive leader has got to do. That whole bit about teams and stuff.

Jean Familant: 11:51

Sure. Well, we have a beach boss, believe it or not. And that's the person that's in charge of putting the teams together. And that includes the kayakers. So there's typically one kayaker for every two swimmers. And it's that person's role to pair up the people, tell them where they're going and what direction they're going to, because as we mentioned earlier, sometimes we swim across the pond. Sometimes we sit to the right or to the left. So they map out where we're gonna be swimming. The kayakers have two-way radios so everybody can stay in touch with each other. And we're told if the dive is gonna be one hour, it's gonna take 30 minutes to swim. So they factor out all of the timing and the beach boss is the ones that basically tell us to go. On our dives safety is the most important thing about what we do because it's very easy for a situation to become unsafe because of what we do. The kayaker is basically the boss of the swimmers. It's the kayaker that tells us when we're gonna move, where we're gonna go. The dive is over. That's too rough. Let it go, we'll get it next time. And they're the ones that really keep us safe.

David Lowry: 13:09

You guys seem addicted to finding trash and cleaning up these ponds. I have to ask you, What is the feeling you get when you bring all of this stuff out to the homeowners association? What is that feeling like for for you and for them?

Susan Baur: 13:25

I'm a retired psychologist and one of the things that I certainly didn't plan, but when you dive for trash, you are just"you and the trash." You are an explorer. You are Lewis and Clark. You are in a new continent because you've never seen this pond floor before. And it is another world. It's not our world. It's the fish and the turtle's world and the plant's world, and the snapping turtle's world. And you never know what you're gonna see. And because it's so hard to do when you're cold and you're tired and because you're so focused you break away from yourself. You get out of your own head. As the great American psychologist William James said, you break free from the cage of self. And when you do, two things happen. You're in the flow, you're challenged, you're focused. Two things happen. One is you see the world with a different set of eyes. And you really appreciate what you see. The other thing that happens is that you get happy. It is a relief to get away from yourself. It's a relief not to think about politics, or calories, or protein, or repairs on your house, or the why is the dog itching and shaking his head? It's such a relief to get rid of all of that. And so I watch these swimmers come out of the water and on their first or

second dive, they come out and they say. Oh, that was fun. But on the third or fourth dive, they come out and say to the air, to nobody in particular. Oh, that was so cool. That was so great. And I think, haha, they've drunk the Kool-Aid and they have been captured by this wonderful freedom, which is really freedom in this beautiful space. When you're swimming, you're free of gravity, but you're free of yourself. So it is a level of triple freedom that most people don't have and it's hard to replicate that. But people on shore say, what are they smoking? We want some.

Don Drew: 15:35

Susan, you just did a wonderful job of explaining what it's like for the individual. What about you as a group the relationships you've formed and so forth? What's that been like for the ladies of OLAUG?

Jean Familant: 15:46

I'll say something about that. Many of us moved to the Cape after we brought up our children, or left the suburbs and came to the cape, which is a normal thing to do when you live in Southeastern Massachusetts anyway, and then to move down here and not have that comradery, and not have those people that you can depend upon, and all of a sudden to find it and to find a group of women that have so many shared interests and so many non shared interests, which makes it very exciting. And we're all discovering each other and really relying upon each other. And out of that has come this extraordinary bond. You're trusting yourself to a kayaker, you're trusting yourself to a beach boss that knows your ability. You're trusting yourself to yourself and to whom you're swimming with because you often need help. So it's become a reliance that's turned into this shared community that, my goodness, I never thought I'd find something this grand.

Mary Grauerholz: 16:45

Sometimes I find myself in a pretty vulnerable situation when we're underwater or trying to pull something up that's really difficult. When you're calling for someone to come and help you drag this thing up, it is a very bonding experience because we feel like what we're doing is important, and we wanna do it right. It's very gratifying.

Susan Baur: 17:10

I agree Mary. I love swimming with you. Remember Long Pond Harwich? I found that anchor and I couldn't budge it. Mary, Mary, come over! You're right. We actually get the garbage, the big garbage, out for each other, and we don't wanna let each other down, as well as not letting the pond down, and letting others down. I try and swim with different people every time. And I've swam with Jean, I've swam with Mary. And I know Jean's impossible to keep up with, but Mary is just great for the deep, heavy stuff. Other ones will get bandaids, but they'll get every bandaid in the pond.

Jean Familant: 17:47

Simpson and I brought up a steel pipe, a solid steel pipe a couple of dives ago.

Susan Baur: 17:54

It was lead. It was a lead pipe.

Jean Familant: 17:56

And it was probably about eight feet long. 12, whatever. It was very long. And we had to very carefully not just pull it up, but then get on either side of it to get it to the canoe, and we had a backup come forward because of the weight of such a thing. And we lifted the back end of it and we slid it and we kept doing that. And finally that lead pipe was out.

Don Drew: 18:24

I have to ask, have you ever found anything of historic value? That area of the country and so forth been lived in for a very long time. Have you ever uncovered anything of rarity or value?

Susan Baur: 18:36

So Don, one of the things you didn't know is that on the dive that you saw, someone had found a gun and they thought, let's not drop it in on that big orange tarp with all the rest of the garbage. This should go to the police station and, who knows what cold case this might be part of? So she hid it in her bathing suit, and when the dive was over, she went to a friend and said, who's gonna take it to the police station? And the friend, luckily, was a very

skeptical person and had a magnet in her car. And she said, let me see that. And it turns out it was made out of tin. It was a toy, it was a replica. And so we looked it up online and it was made by a company that has not been in business for 60 years. That little toy lay in that pond for 70 years, 75 years. And the stuff we see one day is not the stuff you're gonna see the next day.

David Lowry: 19:32

I wanna ask you all a question that has to do with your name, the Old Ladies Against Underwater Garbage. That name is funny, but it's fierce too. And how is embracing age and humor shaped your group and your spirit as you do all of this?

Susan Baur: 19:51

I think you just answered your own question, and that's very cool. I hadn't thought of it exactly as fierce, but that's exactly the point that if you look into aging with a fierce attitude rather than with a fearful attitude and whether you see yourself as a warrior and one radio show said Old Ladies Against Underwater Garbage dive into pond emerge triumphant. And that's always been my favorite one. Yeah! I hope our name suggests that we are fierce and fearless and face age that way and face 10 pound anchors that way and lead pipes that way.

Don Drew: 20:36

That's really interesting. I love this conversation. Earlier one of you mentioned something about challenging or the challenge and as we get older sometimes we think we should not expose ourselves as much to hard challenging things. And what I'm hearing is a great deal of your satisfaction comes from the difficulty, the challenge, the cold water, and the feeling of accomplishment that comes from that. And how often do we lose that feeling or that opportunity to feel accomplishment if we don't take action to make it happen?

Susan Baur: 21:07

You've got a self-selected group. As Jean pointed out, a lot of our group, I would say half the swimmers were on college teams. I was not, so I had to work hard so that I could swim a mile or something like that. But, this isn't your average group that you would find at some

kind of social or game night. We are alpha women. Almost all of us are very assertive, very strong. We have high powered or had high powered careers, and we have kept ourselves in terrific physical shape. I'm 85. I jump in the water. I do a mile. No, I can't keep up to Jean, but I can dive to 12 feet. I can heave up stuff. Yeah we are fierce about not going gentle into that dark night.

Jean Familant: 21:56

I just wanted to add that my mother, she'll be 96 next month, and she's one of the funniest, humorous people I've ever known. She embraces life with humor, and I think that's something that most all of us share, that you can't embrace it without the humor. Because if you didn't have humor about aging, you'd be crying half the time. You just have to face it, make the best of it. So I think that, we all laugh because if you're not laughing, you're probably crying about it. So I just would all take it in stride and, and just really embrace it and enjoy it and find humor in the every day that we're all confronted with.

Mary Grauerholz: 22:40

I remember one dive, Susan and I were with a third woman, I can't remember who it was, but this was Mayor's Pond, Susan. But we found this humongous piece of, we think it must have been construction material, like part of a framework of a roof or something. And the three of us were able to actually pick it up. We worked out a strategy of how we were gonna do it. We got it up and we started going back toward the shore. But it wasn't easy at all to swim and walk this thing back. And suddenly, we were just laughing, all three of us were just laughing because this idea of what we were doing, it just, I don't know. It's a very, it's a very self-effacing, but also very joyful, feeling? You know, one thing I would like to put in a word is protecting that fish and the other water animals. I know one time I saw a duck with a lure through its bill. It was really terrible and a man and his son were trying to get it out and they never were able to do it. That in itself would bring anybody over to our side just seeing one animal or a marine animal that's in trouble because of what people have been throwing into ponds, for at least a, hundreds of years maybe.

Susan Baur: 24:02

The ponds are the last fragment of unspoiled natural beauty that we have on Cape Cod. There are no trails across it. There's no buildings on it. Never been farmed. And it's rare now that we find these pockets of undisturbed natural beauty.

David Lowry: 24:21

As we come close to the end of the program, I'd like to ask the question, what is a life lesson you've learned by being in this group and a challenge you'd like to give our listeners in the second half of life?

Susan Baur: 24:33

I think the life lesson that I have learned, because I got into this by swimming for 18 years by myself. I was fascinated by turtles, and I didn't want to be paying attention to some other swimmer. I swam by myself for 18 years. And I thought of myself. I write books. I think of myself as a loner. And to be embraced by these women I love, and I love every one of them. I did not expect that. I thought I might admire them or whatever, but I would give a pint of blood to any one of them. So the life lesson for me is the joy of knowing these wonderful women. And the challenge that I'd like to give out is to use the words of Margaret Mead, the great anthropologist. There is no power in the world like the zest of a post-menopausal woman. And I believe that the most underutilized resource in the United States is the power, the vitality, the enthusiasm of women between 65 and 85. Let's use it.

Jean Familant: 25:45

The life lesson. I've learned is like Susan, I am quite a solo loner type of a person. I like people, but I really like my alone time. And I've never been on a team as such that has taught me how significant it is to be reliant upon others and others to be reliant upon you, to go after something so big and we're starting piece by piece and together, it's happening. One pond, two pond, five ponds, 10 ponds, 12 ponds. It's happening. And it's not just that one little pond. It's just been building as a team. And I think that's one of the biggest life lessons that I've had, Susan, is that you've brought us all together, and as independent and fierce as we all are, we have that dependence that makes us so significant in each other's being. We are significantly glued to each other when we are on our mission. I would definitely say that's something that has been really a life lesson to me at this point in my life. We're teaching people that it's imperative to take care of our natural resources. Be cause without them, we're really gonna be nothing in the long run. And the mission that Susan's put together for us has taught us how significant and important it is for us to focus on that.

Mary Grauerholz: 27:15

For me it it has something to do with looking fear in the face. It's not always easy for me to dive down and pick something up, because once you get down there, it is like you really are in a whole different world. It can be dark and a morass of plants. And it can be just a bit fearsome or whatever. But, I've looked at in the face, in my own way, and part of it of course is just getting used to the feeling of doing it over and over, and you do get used to it, but that's been very helpful for me.

Jean Familant: 27:51

And we have each other now. I mean, we're a team and we can rely upon others and ask advice from others that have probably gone through with maybe something that we haven't yet and we don't know how to face it. And using of this power and all of this wonderful aging group of women, to have that as a resource is totally invaluable.

David Lowry: 28:17

Those are really wonderful life lessons. There is no end to the creative ways in which people in their second half of life are discovering how to bring their passions and skills to new means of expression. Susan simply loved swimming in the Cape Cod's plentiful ponds, and the adventure of discovery. And from this love of swimming in adventure came an organization as unique as its mission. Women like Mary and Jean and Susan have discovered their own connections with OLAUG's mission. Susan, Mary and Jean, thank you for being with us today on Peaceful Life Radio and thank you for sharing your stories. And thank you to all the women of OLAUG for the challenging work you are doing and the fun you are having doing it.