

## LITERATURE

# Trying His Hand At Novel Writing

## Former Long-Islander writer debuts 'Fire Island' in Huntington

By Mike Koehler

mkoehler@longislandernews.com

Former *Long-Islander* staff writer John J. Stevens's career has always been about taking the next step in communication. It only makes sense a novel and an appearance at Book Revue would be the next step in the Greenlawn man's legacy.

Stevens will unveil "Fire Island" – a story of how a crash changed one captain's look on life – at the Huntington store, located at 313 New York Ave. in Huntington, on Dec. 14 at 7 p.m.

"Fire Island" is a fictional tale based on historically accurate 19th century Long Island captain William Trask. While returning from China to lower Manhattan, Trask's vessel crashes on Fire Island, causing many deaths, vessel damage and the loss of Trask's leg. The wreck, however, sets him on a new path in life.

The inspiration for the story came well before the new millennium when Stevens was around a campfire on Fire Island hearing about members of the defunct United States Lifesaving Service – also known as Surfmen – from a National Park ranger. Predecessor to the Coast Guard, these volunteers patrolled the shoreline for helpless vessels.

"It was sort of an idea that grabbed me and wouldn't let go," he said.

Throughout the book, risk and life are a common theme. Human beings are one of the few species willing to put themselves at risk to save a complete stranger,

Stevens said.

"The book takes a look at that issue and asks the question: Why? Why is life worth living? We're all going to die anyway. If someone's floundering in the surf, why save them?" he said.

Stevens started "Fire Island" in the 1990s, but the book required intensive amounts of research. He needed 15 years to finish, which accounted for writing, raising a family and developing a career of interacting with people.

"I'm a communicator," the author said. "When you get to be 52, there's enough of a trail behind you that you can look back and see how you got there."

Stevens' career began with *The Long-Islander* in 1981. An English major in college with a love for Long Islander founder Walt Whitman, he convinced then-editor Shirley Pearlman to let him write for free and earn a position. That occurred after he covered a boxing match between heavyweight legend and Huntington resident Gerry Cooney and Ken Norton.

"She published the article and very soon after she offered me a job. I thought I was the luckiest guy alive," Stevens said, recalling a portrait of Whitman looking down at him.

He spent several months with the newspaper, regularly walking up the fire escape to the second floor of the Rosa's Pizza building on Main Street in Huntington and covering everything thrown his way. Along the way he met Frank Eck, a reporter known for writing high school

sports and as grizzled as Stevens was green. His personality, and name, made such an impact that the author incorporated a version of Eck into his book almost 30 years later.

"There is a little bit of truth there in the character I created," he said, revealing Eck is the villain. "I didn't know him that well. I was like Jimmy Olsen, a cub reporter. He was intimidating to me."

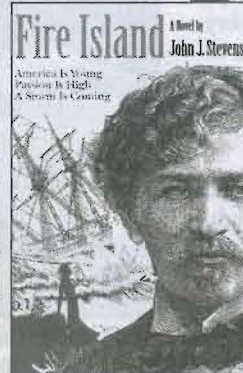
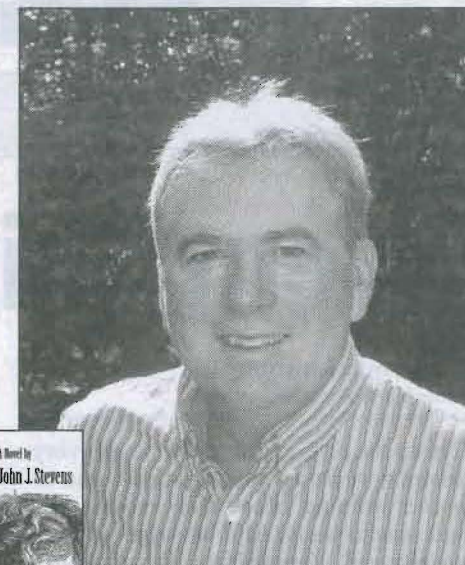
Stevens left the newspaper business in 1982, as home video was becoming popular. A cousin who owned a Huntington bar started a small business, carrying camera gear on both shoulders to film weddings, parties and special moments. The author eventually ended up creating several PBS documentaries and learning to edit footage.

"The idea you can plug something into the back of your television and watch what you just taped was amazing. I fell in love with that type of communication technology," Stevens said.

His career moved ahead in 1998 when the Greenlawn man started Bullfrog Communications out of his home. His small business specializes in web design, graphic art and e-mail marketing.

Now the novel is just "one way" of communicating.

"Fire Island" is available for purchase through Amazon, Barnes & Noble's web-



**Greenlawn's John Stevens, a former staff writer for *The Long-Islander*, will promote in Huntington on Tuesday his book "Fire Island," a tale based on a real shipwreck.**

site, barnesandnoble.com, and other online retailers in e-reader format for \$6 and paper for \$11.

Stevens, however, currently limited Book Revue to be the sole brick and mortar supplier of the print version.

"There is no better place to have this premiere than there. It took me a while to convince people because I'm not Lindsay Lohan writing a tell-all. I'm a first time local writer," he said. "They were very kind to host the event. I'm very appreciative of it."