



Publisher's Note: Continuing our "Women to Watch" series, we celebrate the passion, commitment and enthusiasm of Amy Wallace, Barnstable County's Emergency Preparedness Project Assistant.

Woman to Watch: Amy Wallace

by Lisa Markley

Amy Wallace is eager to get to work. At a small café called Nirvana, which sits in the shadow of the Barnstable County Complex, she sips her coffee and enthusiastically discusses the journey that brought her to Cape Cod.

As the Emergency Preparedness Project Assistant for Barnstable County, Wallace possesses both empathy for a diverse client base and a motherly protectiveness for the first responders she deeply respects.

Her office is located in the revamped county jail, a space once occupied by prison guards. Wallace painted the high walls a soft yellow and decorated the space with yard sale finds and personal photos. A sign on her desk implores "Be Nice or Leave."

In 1986, Congress passed the Emergency Planning and Community Right to Know Act, commonly known as EPCRA. This bill requires each governor to appoint a State Emergency Response Commission (SERC) which then divides the state into planning districts responsible for appointing Local Emergency Planning Committees (LEPC).

Facilities covered by EPCRA are required to submit an emergency and hazardous chemical inventory form to their LEPC, SERC and their local fire department by March 1 of each year.

Since accepting this post with the county nearly seven years ago, Wallace has made great strides in awareness and compliance.

Among her accomplishments is a marked increase in Tier II participation among county businesses, increasing the number of reporters from 64 to 330. These numbers are tangible evidence of Wallace's effectiveness.

Wallace describes the responsibility as compliance assistance, not enforcement. "I'm here to help the reporting facilities," she says. "My job is to keep them out of trouble. If they don't comply, I explain the repercussions and the fines." She adds, "I'm here to protect the firefighters and first responders. On that, the deadline is non-negotiable."

More difficult to measure is the passion and enthusiasm she brings to her job. On this day, most of Wallace's callers begin with "Amy, I'm so sorry to bother you. I know you must be busy."

They all end with a relieved voice thanking her for her guidance. "You are always so kind to me," concludes one caller. "I try to make it easy for everyone," reasons Wallace. "My job is to collect the data. I'm here to help."

Wallace is a believer in commitment, loyalty and serendipity. Those three have been driving forces in her life, both personally and professionally.

Her studies and career have taken her from her hometown state of Ohio to the West Coast, Alabama and then onto Hawaii before being beckoned to Cape Cod. "Wherever there is opportunity, we go," says Wallace, whose husband makes his living as an Explosives Ordinance Technician.

Her journey has been dotted with memorable events that seemed to have shaped her future. Like her husband, Wallace is the youngest of three children. She grew up in Cleveland, the product of Midwest sensibility.

The first time she ever swam in the ocean was on a family vacation to the Cape at age eleven. She calls her first encounter with saltwater, "a spiritual experience" until a wave knocked her down and a large man fell on her head in the surf. She remembers coming up for air with a swimsuit full of sand and thinking, "That wasn't supposed to happen."

Wallace adds, "That was my first Cape Cod day, but things have gotten better for me at the beach."



Amy Wallace, working to keep us safe.

Like the inner connection she felt with the Cape that day, Wallace also had an epiphany back home. As she prepared to go boating with her father one day, she reached into the water to scoop out a minnow and realized there was raw sewage floating by. After quickly extricating her arm, she thought, "Someone needs to work to fix that."

Wallace earned an undergraduate degree in general studies with a minor in communication from Kent State University. While there, she designed her course load and gained extensive experience in the environmental field with work/study jobs, internships and volunteer assignments.

Wallace's philosophy of working from the ground up led her to have a better understanding of the whole process from the labor end to the administrative side.

In search of graduate schools, Wallace opted for a Regional Planning and Environmental Policy program at Washington State University in Pullman.

She made the 2000-mile drive accompanied by her aunt. After unpacking the car in oppressive heat she wandered onto her deck to look at the rolling hills surrounding her new home.

The enormity of her decision suddenly struck Wallace, who remembers thinking, "What have I done?" Wallace shrugged off the dread and told herself, "Buck up, go inside and unpack. You're going to grad school, baby!"

An hour later, there was a knock on the door. Her neighbor introduced himself and mentioned that he'd seen her moving in. With a laugh, Wallace recalls clarifying that he had indeed watched her move heavy boxes up the stairs in 87-degree heat and hadn't offered to help. Looking at the downtrodden face of her new neighbor, Wallace let him know she was joking and mentioned she had cold beer.

Wallace smiles as she recalls that first meeting with her future husband. "That was August of 1995. We were like peas and carrots and have been inseparable ever since."

While in graduate school, Wallace worked as the campus recycling coordinator and eventually became the county coordinator. As recycling began to gain momentum, Wallace was able to secure grant money to help fund her programs. Wallace's boss gave her free reign, explaining he couldn't compensate her monetarily but could provide her with a great resume.

Wallace's total immersion in the project empowered her, laying the groundwork for her environmental career. The next stop for her and her husband was Hawaii, where they worked for the government on a project to locate and map unexploded ordnances on a remote island.

Reflecting back to her "spiritual experience" swimming in salt water for the first time, Wallace knew she would return to the Cape one day. That opportunity came in the spring of 2004 when she accepted a job with the Town of Barnstable to assist with emergency planning. After just six months in that position, Wallace beat out some heavy hitters to land her current job with the county.

The challenges proved to be personal as well as professional, however, when Wallace suffered a powerful loss with the sudden death of her father just three months after moving to the Cape.

If you know of a Cape Woman who is making her mark on her community and would like to share her story, please email the publisher:
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Within 48 hours, she went from working out on a treadmill in Falmouth to picking out a coffin for her father halfway across the country. As her family rallied to come to terms with the loss, Wallace's sister found out she was pregnant. It reminded everyone of how fragile life is and that when someone leaves, someone else is on the way.

Although feeling broken and unfocused after the loss of her father, Wallace realized she had to dig in. "I thought to myself, I can't stumble – I can't stop. I've got to drive on." Wallace describes herself as a fiercely committed individual and that appears to translate to her career.

Besides the critically important Tier II reporting, Wallace is involved with a number of other projects. Among those are the Hazardous Material Identification and Inventory Subcommittee, the Cape Cod Citizen's Corp Council, and the Cape and Islands Health Agent's Coalition.

The latter group keeps Wallace particularly busy as it provides town Health Agents with required training that they would otherwise need to seek off-Cape. Among their current projects is Emergency Preparedness for children with special needs.

Despite all the irons that Wallace has in the fire, she handles the pressure with characteristic grace and a good-natured attitude. "I would have to say my favorite part of the job is the autonomy. I get a great deal of support from my supervisor Sean O'Brien and that allows me to just run with a project and try to make it great."

Wallace resides in Marstons Mills with her husband Rob and their toy poodles, Marley and Louie. A new addition to the family is a 12-year-old Yorkshire terrier named Bizzy, adopted from the MSPCA.

With her usual excitement, Wallace describes the newest member of her family as an "uber love muffin." The act of bringing this elderly canine into her home is typical of Wallace who sees her life and career as an endless flow of opportunity.

A woman who loves a challenge, Wallace greeted her 40th birthday last year with a personal goal of whipping herself back into shape. A former competitive body builder as an undergraduate at Kent State University, Wallace has rededicated herself to fitness. She works out at least six days per week and teaches both spinning and core strength at two local facilities.

Reflecting back on her strict upbringing, Wallace recalls, "We were taught that we all have a purpose. We are meant to be productive. I feel like Rob and I are environmental stewards. I think that is our calling, to clean up different parts of the country."

Pushing herself away from her desk, Wallace takes a rare moment to relax and reflect. "My enthusiasm comes from commitment. I'm not looking for a crowning achievement. It's about keeping people safe. That's the goal." Wallace smiles and adds, "I'm not an heiress, but wealth is just a matter of perspective. I have my family, my job, my pets, my home. That's pretty good."

As Wallace turns back to her desk, she says, "My goal is to improve haz-mat safety in different arenas. There is a constant flow of identifying needs and making things better. There are always tangible results."

Reaching for the phone to offer assistance to her next caller, Wallace concludes, "I realize I'm in the public eye and that means I have to earn my keep."

Luckily for the people of Barnstable County, that won't be a problem.

Lisa Markley lives in Brewster with her partner Sarah and her chocolate cocker spaniel Sophie.