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Lady of the Light

Story and photos by [PA2 Luke Pinneo](#)



Where there is light, there is hope.

For centuries, seafarers have endured Atlantic storms and found safe haven in Boston Harbor. The light of hope they have known since 1776 still shines today. It is Boston Light, that beacon of promise on Little Brewster Island.

"For sailors, after being out at sea, they come to the entrance of the harbor and they see the light - they know they made it," said Sally Snowman.

She's the keeper of Boston Light. To her, helping others see the light means far more than just keeping the bulbs lit.

Her first encounter with the light was in 1961 during a day trip to Little Brewster Island with her father. Her father was a member of the Coast Guard Auxiliary and she accompanied him on an island rendezvous with other auxiliaries. She was 10 years old, and said she instantly fell in love with the island.

"Something resonated with me when I was 10 years old," she said. "There was something about the energy of Little Brewster Island."

She vowed to return. Her dream of being married on the island came true in 1994 and in the years following, she and her husband began volunteering as assistant keepers.

In 2003, the head keeper's position opened up and she applied for the job.

It's not an average job. It requires spending days on an island with as few as two people for as long as 21 days on end. Supplies are brought by boat with each crew rotation. Only four structures exist on the island: the boathouse, the two-story keeper's quarters, an oil house and the light tower. There is electricity, a phone, television and running water.

There are no pizza deliveries, last minute grocery store trips, and the mailman never comes.

When she applied, the Coast Guard interviewed her and asked what it was about Boston Light that drew her to the job.

"I said 'This island talks to me,'" she said.

Although she felt a deep personal connection with the island, she quickly realized how odd that must have sounded.

"So that came out of my mouth and I thought, 'Well, I just lost this job.'"

But she hadn't. Instead, she was hired as the 70th keeper of Boston Light and is the first woman ever to hold that position.

Today from the island, one can look out over the water and trace the Boston skyline just 5 ½ miles away.

It feels farther.

Waves gently slap the pebbled shoreline and the faint rhythm of buoy bells ring in the distance. The metal pier leading up to the old boathouse softly echoes with creaks and moans as each wave rolls ashore. On an ocean breeze, an occasional seabird glides by with a squawk or two.

It is otherwise quiet. It is serene.

"And then you have a nine-foot crystal sitting at the top of the tower," she said, speaking of the antique Fresnel lens in the lighthouse.

She said for ages, people have been known to carry crystals or stones in their pockets to keep them calm and centered. They say it brings them peace.

"We have a lens up there made of 336 individual prisms," she said.

As someone who holds stock in the special attributes of crystal, she said a quiet morning

spent in the highest part of the tower cleaning the lens is very soothing.

The lens is designed to concentrate the light into beams that can be seen for great distances. Many eyes throughout history have seen the beams of Boston Light.

"Metaphorically, seeing the light means so many things to so many people on different levels," she said.

One obvious thing she said, is that as a major aid to navigation, it promotes commerce through Boston Harbor. "That was the goal back in 1716 when it was established, it's the goal here in the 21st Century," she said.

But there's a bit more to it than just the obvious.

Rhetorically, she asked, "Why do we see lighthouses in so many advertisements?" She cited insurance companies using lighthouses on their logos.

"It's a symbol - a symbol of hope and a symbol of peace," she said.

She said people really need that today, especially in a world full of - the word she uses - "hubbub," which generally means noise, uproar, confusion or turmoil.

"It's all the static and negative information that's out there that people are emotionally tying into, whether it's terrorism, taxes, worrying about the price of fossil fuel this winter. And then you come to a place like Little Brewster Island and you look at Boston, and you're transformed into a peaceful tranquility. Your worries seem to - I don't think they disappear, but you get a new perspective. It's like heaven on earth."

She said she hopes people who visit the island can feel the bliss she has come to know. Even if it's just a glimpse, she's confident people can experience it if they want to and take it with them.

"They are going to find that peace. And when they go back, amongst that hubbub, they can find that peace if they take the time to find it. We all have the ability to do it."

Hubbub is everywhere on the planet, but there's also peace and tranquility here for those who seek it out. Little Brewster Island is quiet and secluded and she said she knows it's a good place for someone to find inner peace. But she said although a trip to a remote location is convenient, it's not crucial.

"You're only going to find peace in one place and that's inside your own heart," she said.



BOSTON - Sally Snowman, the keeper of Boston Light, is dressed in her traditional clothing as she poses for a photograph, in an on-going effort to preserve the rich history of lighthouse keepers, in Boston on September 27, 2007. Snowman is the 70th keeper of Boston Light. The previous 69 were all men. (Coast Guard Photo/Luke Pinneo).

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