



Lisa Reisman / For Hearst Connecticut Media

Priscilla Ochman, Janet Giordano and Kelsey Mulligan relax on the Ed Ochman memorial bench on Killam's Point in Branford



A framed photo of beloved fisherman Ed Ochman wearing his signature fish cap on the memorial bench in his honor on Killam's Point in Branford.

# Ed Ochman honored with bench at Killam's Point

By Lisa Reisman

BRANFORD — He was the only one who dared to wear the cap, and the only one who could get away with it.

It was red with a slightly disgruntled-looking fish sticking out of its crown. For decades, it was a constant bright spot among the acres of wilderness, salt marsh and rocky shore of Killam's Point in Branford.

Under the bill of the cap was the twinkly-eyed, perpetually grinning face of Ed Ochman, who died unexpectedly at 67 in April 2017.

"You couldn't miss it," said Take A Vet Fishing's Jeff Buggee, relaxing at a picnic table at the nature preserve, among a crowd that turned out on a recent sun-washed June Sunday to celebrate Ochman's life.

"If a kid from Camp Totokett or a veteran needed help baiting a hook, or untangling a fishing line, you could stand on the porch and immediately pick out that cap and there was Ed."

As part of the ceremony, Ochman's daughter Chelsea and wife Priscilla helped unveil an 8-foot bench, a gleaming work of art made of powder-coated steel on a slab of concrete overlooking the Sound.

Chelsea recalled her father wearing the fish cap as a chap-erone to her sixth grade field trip to the zoo.

"At first I was slightly mortified, but then I realized he was right, it did make him easy to find in a crowd," she said.

Chelsea was 2 weeks old when her father first took her out on his boat. That was how much he loved to fish.

"If it swam, he fished for it," winter, spring, summer and fall," Buggee said.

And not only with his 2-week-old daughter.

"He honestly loved seeing other people getting excited and hooking a fish," Chelsea said. "I

have very fond memories of him yelling 'fish on!' and then nimbly running the rocks at Killam's Point or jumping into the water if necessary to make sure that kid or veteran landed the fish."

If, as the old yarn goes, there's no such thing as too much equipment for a fisherman, "Ed used his equipment as tools to teach life lessons," TAVF coordinator Jeff Arnsen said.

That meant children from families with one or more members infected with HIV/AIDS who, as part of Camp Totokett, enjoy a carefree escape at Killam's Point for a week each July. Since its founding in 1996, Ochman returned every year to teach kids how to fish, the first to arrive and the last to leave.

"Ed didn't only teach the campers how to catch fish and how to clean them," Arnsen said. "Each year, he took pictures of each kid with the fish they caught, which also gave them this real, tangible sense of accomplishment."

"Mr. Ed," as he was known to many campers, shared his love of the natural world with them. "Remember, these were city kids who were living in isolation and silence," Buggee said. "Ed understood the therapeutic nature of breathing in the fresh salt air and being out there on the rocks."

Given Ochman's work with the Camp Totokett kids, it seemed only natural for Buggee, along with fellow First Congregational Church of Branford members Tim and Lou Auletta Wells, to approach him in 2007 about an outreach mission that involved veterans and fishing that they had conceived.

"Ed replied, without a beat, 'When do we start?' and then, with a deadpan expression on his face, wondered aloud if we wanted him or his equipment," Buggee recalled with a smile. As a founding member of

Take a Vet Fishing, which aims to "get veterans out of the clinical environment for a relaxing day of fishing," as its website reads, Ochman continued his work teaching the restorative comfort and joy of fishing.

And not just during the summer.

"Ed had the veterans from the (Eastern Blind Rehabilitation Center) learning fly-tying during the winter," said TAVF's Diana Chadwick, referring to the process of using feather and a fish hook to create an artificial fly for bait. "He got that fly tying could also be an invigorating change from the Blind Center." He also "made it okay to go search for nail lacquers for in the women's cosmetics aisle for artificial flies," said TAVF board member Ray Luhn.

Which brings us back to another reason Ochman could get away with wearing that hat. And that might not be material fit for a family newspaper.

His was an "absolute bawdy humor, a lot of innuendo," said friend Regan Mulligan.

"He never failed to make others laugh and smile, even though many of his jokes were highly inappropriate," Chelsea said.

"Just a great storyteller, with a real sharp wit," said Luhn, then grew somber.

"Not long after Ed passed, we welcomed Take A Vet Fishing's 500th participant," he said, as the sun glanced off the bench and a gull wailed from above.

"That's in no small part due to Ed's passion for fishing, passion for our veterans, and wanting to leave the world a better place."

*For additional information, visit Take A Vet Fishing at [takeavetfishing.com](http://takeavetfishing.com) and on Facebook or contact Ray Luhn at 203-675-3266. Checks may be sent to First Congregational Church, 1009 Main St. Branford, CT 06405. Make payable to FCCB/TAVF.*