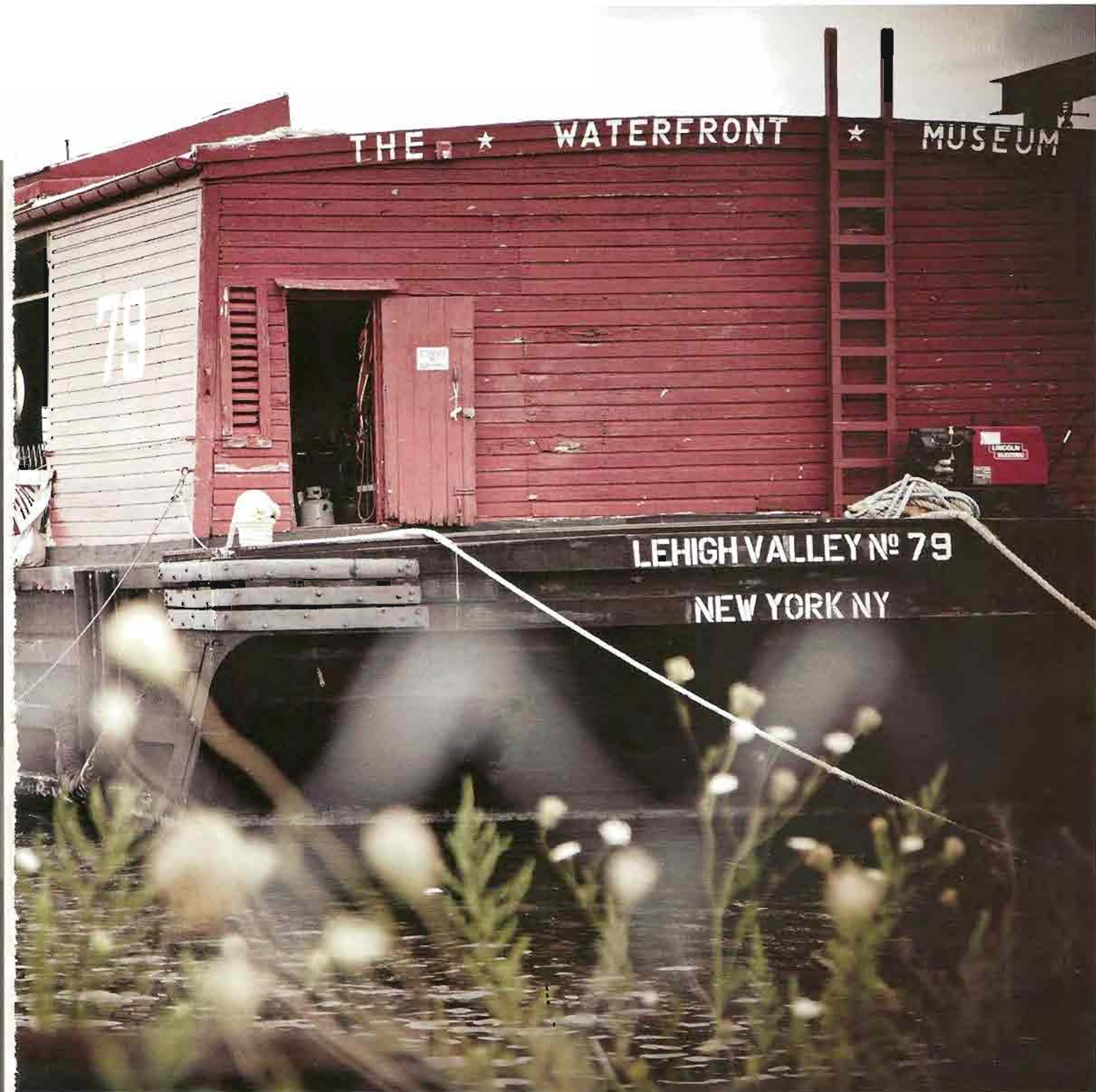


OVERFLOW

ISSUE 11 :: FALL 2011

gowanus . red hook . carroll gardens
cobble hill . boerum hill . park slope
prospect heights . windsor terrace

FREE



Dollar Float

by Kerri MacDonald.
photos by Eric Vogel.

Aside from its floating state, it doesn't look entirely like a boat. Hulking, boxy, a deep, barn red, The Lehigh Valley is tucked into the bay alongside Conover Street, behind the Fairway supermarket. It's the last thing between Red Hook and Lady Liberty.

If you want to get nautical-technical, this is not a boat, but a barge. The Lehigh Valley Railroad Barge #79, to be exact. Its more familiar name, these days, is the Waterfront Museum and Showboat Barge. It's on the National Register of Historic Places. It is, the records show, the last covered wooden barge of its kind. And David Sharps, the vessel's skipper, bought it in 1985, for one dollar.

On an oppressive Tuesday morning in August, I call out from the dock, where I'm standing, dripping. Sharps appears behind a locked gate. He's wearing a white wife beater with grey athletic shorts. When he welcomes me onboard, I find him tidying up to a twanging country rhythm.

The room looks like the inside of a barn, but cleaner. Artsy-er. It's wide, and rustic. The floor is made of wooden planks. It smells like musty sea air. A canoe hangs from the ceiling, and kitschy paintings are strung along each of the walls. There's a Rube Goldberg machine—a carnival contraption that performs a simple task in an overly-complicated way—at one end of the room. At the other, a breakfast bar obscures a kitchen.

Aside from me this morning, Sharps is expecting somewhere around 100 visitors, kids from the Union Settlement Association in Harlem. ("They'll rock this place," he notes as he spreads mats on the floor for his audience.) The kids take field trips throughout the summer: Coney Island. Central Park. The 97-year-old barge behind Fairway in Red Hook.

Two counselors in purple shirts appear on the dock around 10:45. The kids trail behind them a minute later. "Welcome, mates," Sharps says as the children—some as young as five—plod inside. "Have a seat on the rugs, if you would. Make yourself comfortable."

"It smells like fish," says a tall girl with braids.

Once the kids are cross-legged, Sharps is up at the front, his mouth closed, a big smile on his face. Out of nowhere, he begins miming. When he finally picks up a microphone, he coaxes the kids into a repetitive rhythm.

Sharps: Ahoy. Kids: Ahoy.

Arrg. (Arrg.) Ayay, captain. (Ayay, captain.) Ahoy, matey. (Ahoy, matey.) Raise the anchor! (Raise the anchor!) Raise the sail! (Raise the sail!) Land ho! (Land ho!) Swab the deck! (Swab the deck!)

This goes on. Some of the older kids, sitting on benches, smirk, too cool.

My name's David. (My name's David.) No, *my* name's David. (No, *my* name's David.) What a coincidence! (What a coincidence!) I got this boat for one dollar. (I got this boat for one dollar?) It was full of mud. (*It was full of mud?*)

Now they're listening.



"There's other highways besides the roads that our buses and our cars and our trucks travel on," Sharps says. At the Waterfront Museum, he says after a brief historical interlude, "we're all about getting people out and on and in the water."

It's a bit of a line, but he knows what he's doing. Sharps begins with entertainment, adds a dash of education, and tops it off with some more fun.

Sharps, by the way, is a clown. Literally.

The first time we met, he was acting for a different demographic. It was a hot Thursday evening in mid-July. The barge was docked further north, at Pier Six, in Brooklyn Bridge Park at the foot of Atlantic Avenue.

I had to tap dance through a downward-dogging yoga class on the pier to reach the entrance. Inside, a white projector screen flashed with an image showing a poster of a showboat: *A Monumental American Classic*. In front of a scattered audience, a bespectacled old man, Norman, began to preach the history of the New York showboat scene. The takeaway: The heyday has long since passed.

Sharps, who sat quietly throughout, is doing what he can to keep that history alive. The Lehigh Valley has what one visitor aptly told me is "a Terry Gilliam feel," with its Rube Goldberg machine; its makeshift stage; its fanciful art exhibits; its clown.

While Sharps is very much a yesteryear man, he's looking to the future. As varying factors kick in—schools can't afford field trips; the city is flooding its waterfront with concession stands, not museums—he's got to think fast. And, at 55, Sharps is starting to think about whatever comes next.

He's been docked here since 1994. The neighborhood has changed—both for the good, he acknowledges diplomatically, and the bad. "For years, we were kind of one of the cultural beacons

that were bringing people here," he said, with a hint of pride. Yet: "There's a side of me that loves and misses the Wild West of the old Red Hook—the isolated fishing village, our own little secret that we loved."

For a tourist attraction like this, Red Hook is not the city's most lucrative piece of real estate. This is not the South Street Seaport. On Saturdays, a range of people wander through—families, couples, boat enthusiasts. The museum is free. (Those who donate get a temporary tattoo.) There



are summertime events, like the onboard circus, Showboat Shazzam! Sharps used to host weddings, but has since made an agreement to keep things educational. That means grants and external funding.

So it helps that Sharps went to business school. But by profession, he's a performer. He grew up in Appalachia. After a stint as a juggler, touring the globe by sea with Carnival cruise line, he ended up in Paris, where he attended l'École Internationale

de Théâtre Jacques Lecoq and took up residence on his first barge. In 1985, he headed to New York and ended up, once again, on a boat.

On a Saturday early in August, Sharps pulled out a MacBook Pro to show me some grainy videos—highlights from his commercial clowning career. Wrigley's gum. Sprite. Wendy's. (Sharps played Dave Thomas's body in what appears to be a pioneering use of special effects.)

But Buned somewhere beneath his clownish exterior is a passionate sort of anger—the type you might expect to find in a guy living on a boat in a city that seems to forget it's predominantly composed of islands. (Sharps doesn't really fall into the angry mariner category. He lives with his wife and two daughters on the barge. He's an amiable, generally happy guy.)

When he bought the Lehigh Valley, it took him two years to dig it out of the mud. It was a passion. He turned it into an art.

But as we were on the boat that Saturday, rainclouds approaching, he pointed to the paintings on the walls, on loan and for sale: "Do you think I'm going to sell any of these?" he said, voice raised and eyes wide. "You think these people have a job that they love? They don't. New York City is full of so many talented people, all doing something else."

In many ways, Sharps's juggling habits align neatly with his passion for the waterfront.

In them, he sees something that few others can. "We know we have something that's wonderful with the tug and the barge," he said. "I've never been one to—" he stopped and took a breath.

"I follow my heart. My bottom line had never been, you know, 'How am I gonna make a lot of money?' It's always been: 'How can I do what I want to do?' Which is always a challenge. People won't pay me money to do this."

