

2019 Group Outstanding Achievement Award Winner



AIFRB selected the Gills Club as the 2019 recipient of the AIFRB Group Outstanding Achievement Award. Since 1982, AIFRB's Outstanding Achievement Awards have recognized sustained contributions of significant publications, exceptional service to the fishery profession, outstanding teaching or training programs, important discoveries or inventions and significant contributions to the advancement of fishery science. Nominated by Dr. Cate O'Keefe, the Gills Club was unanimously selected by the AIFRB Board to receive the 2019 award. The Gills Club is the Atlantic White Shark Conservancy's STEM-based education initiative dedicated to connecting girls with female scientists from around the world, sharing knowledge, and inspiring ocean research and conservation, with a focus on sharks. The Club was established in 2014 by a team of dedicated female shark researchers and conservationists who recognized the need to enhance STEM education and experience

for elementary and middle school girls. The Club's founders recognized the gender disparity and lack of diversity in higher education and the professional fisheries workplace. The focused efforts on introducing hands-on, experiential learning to the youngest generation to boost their chances of entering a career in science.

Founded in Massachusetts, the Club has expanded their research mentoring team to include nearly 100 leading female shark scientists from around the world. They offer hands-on K-12 educational events, provide scholarships for undergraduate students to attend intensive field-based courses, and serve as mentors for aspiring female scientists. Initially, the free, hands-on learning program was offered on Cape Cod, and as the Gills Club emerged as a leader in fostering STEM education for girls, the program grew. With assistance from research laboratories and aquariums around the country, the Club's events have been attended by over 2,000 kids.

The Outstanding Achievement Award will be presented to the Gills Club at an educational event in the summer of 2020. We interviewed Gills Club co-founder Marianne Long to learn more about the organization and their continued success.

How did the Gills Club start and what was the inspiration?

"The Gills Club was established by Cynthia Wigren (AWSC Co Founder and CEO), Dr. Heather Marshall (Professor at State College of Florida), Julie Patterson (Graphic Designer), and me (Marianne Long, AWSC Education Director). At various outreach events we had all met amazing young girls who were interested in sharks and aspired to be shark scientists. Unfortunately, these girls shared similar experiences with us of being made fun of at school because of their love of sharks or being told that sharks are for boys. We wanted those young girls to know that they weren't alone, that many girls (and women!) love sharks, and that a career in shark science was possible. So, the idea was born to connect girls interested in sharks to each other, as well as to women conducting shark research so they could be introduced to powerful role models in the field."



Marianne Long performs a dissection with MA high school students. Photo courtesy Cape Cod Times

How did you grow your network of scientists to include so many leading female shark scientists globally?

“In the beginning and even now it is word-of-mouth. Scientists recommend other scientists and we’ve had some women reach out because they want to get involved. We do have criteria, that all science team members have a Master's degree, and it has been awesome to see that many students have approached Gills Club Science Team members at conferences sharing how they hope to get involved when they finish school.”

How has the Club expanded its reach to students?

“When Gills Club was founded, we were approached by the Cape Cod Museum of Natural History (CCMNH) to do an event to help launch the initiative. We immediately saw the impact of providing a hands-on learning opportunity, so we expanded the program to monthly events at CCMNH. Soon after, Mote Marine Lab and several other aquariums and educational facilities expressed interest in running Gills Club events at their facilities as well. While expanding the program, we've stayed true to our goal of offering a free experiential learning opportunity to all girls interested.”

How has the Gills Club evolved with your continued success?

“We have really grown our social media presence since that is a great way to connect with people and allow interaction between scientists and individuals. We have also done some larger events, including the Gills Club Symposium. We offered a scholarship to the Shoals Marine Lab Shark Biology Course the past several summers, which has been great to provide a unique learning opportunity to a young woman. As we look to the future we are working on an app, and hopefully another symposium!”

For more information about the Gills Club, please visit:

Website: www.gillsclub.org

Symposium Video: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=M0mrakms4y8&t=31s>

Cape media news story on events:

<https://www.facebook.com/CapeMediaNews/videos/2599544773664092/UzpfSTE2MDk1MzQ1MTI4NTUzND01MDE4OTgzMDcxOTEwNDU/>



Dr. Cynthia Wigren with an 8-year-old shark enthusiast. Photo courtesy of AWSC.