

MARBLEHEAD

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The Gerry 5 VFA is the Marblehead way

👤 Ryan Vermette



The function hall at the Gerry 5 VFA has hosted a wide range of events, from weddings to high school sports banquets. *Photo by Spenser Hasak*

Located at 210 Beacon St., the Gerry No. 5 Veteran Fireman's Association has a longstanding history of embodying everything that Marblehead is about: History, community, and philanthropy.

"It's a local mainstay," Gerry Manager Art Dodge said. "These are real Marblehead working people."

Established in 1956, the association was originally started by a group of Marbleheaders in the cellar of John Banks' estate in order to preserve the Gerry No. 5 handtub, a hand-powered fire engine used during the 19th century. The handtub was named after Elbridge Gerry, a Marbleheader, the fifth vice president of the United States, and a former governor of Massachusetts. It was built for the town in 1845 and fought its first fire at Roundy's Mill on Nov. 2 of that year.

The handtub was officially retired in 1890, and for nearly a century, the Gerry 5 VFA had competed in competitions known as fireman's musters, which are events held to see how far different firefighter associations are able to pump water out of their handtubs. Though the handtub is no longer used in competitive musters, it is still stored at the club in the basement, along with a display case of the dozens of fire muster awards that the Gerry has won over the years.

To date, the Gerry No. 5 VFA is home to more than 900 members and is a venue used for almost any occasion. At the front of the building is a full bar area where members can grab a drink and some food. At the back is a function hall that Dodge says has held everything from weddings to the Gridiron Club's Old Timers Banquet, to the Town Democratic Committee Picnic that was held on Monday.

"It's a great place," Dodge said. "All the sports teams come up here and have their banquets."

Dodge mentioned the banquet following the Marblehead High School football team's first ever state championship in 2021, saying that nearly everyone associated with the team came to the association for a giant celebration.

Though the association is only open to its members, the function hall is open for use to the public. Birthday parties, luncheons, anniversaries, you name it, the Gerry 5 will hold it.

"We'll do anything, really, that works," Dodge said.

The Gerry 5 also helps out the community in a number of other ways. Dodge says it currently offers 13 scholarships to Marblehead High School seniors to help them pursue their college education.

In addition, the club hosts an annual Kids' Christmas party where children are treated to lunch, a special gift from the Gerry, and get to see Santa Claus ride in on a fire truck. The Gerry is also a sponsor of the Angel Fund, which helps sick children and their families who are falling on tough times.

But the Gerry doesn't stop there. The club also sponsors a golf league and softball team, along with "many other activities all in order to 'give back' to the community," the Gerry website reads.

For members, the club hosts a number of events each year including an annual craft fair each November, comedy nights, and meat and trivia contests.

The Red Cross hosts blood drives three times a year there, and animal-rescue organizations have even come up to hold pet adoption events, Dodge said.

Though a lot of work goes into the numerous events the club runs among other features of the club, Dodge, who has been involved with the club since he was in his 20s, said that he is very fortunate to be in this position at the Gerry.

"It's fun, it's rewarding. I'm very lucky," Dodge said.

Dodge took over as manager of the association 14 years ago, succeeding Joan Champlain, who had served in that role for four decades. Dodge credited Champlain for a great amount of work that has been done at the Gerry, including the Horribles Parade. Celebrated on the July 4 every year, the parade features hundreds of children in costumes riding on homemade floats through downtown Marblehead. Dodge said that before he took over, Champlain had been running the parade since the 1950s.

"She was the glue," Dodge said. "This is her place. I've been here for 14 years, but it's still her place."

The Gerry is open seven days a week, from 3 to 10 p.m. Monday through Wednesday, 12 to 11 p.m. on Thursdays, 12 p.m. to midnight Fridays and Saturdays, and from 12 p.m. to 10 p.m. on Sundays. Dodge said those looking to become members can do so by visiting the club anytime. Memberships are \$100 each and an additional \$100 each year afterward.

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