



FAMILY TIDES

Part of Fort Myers' old guard, the Kelly clan carries a legacy of spearfishing in Gulf waters through generations.

BY JENNIFER REED PHOTOGRAPHY BY CANDICE HEIZMANN

Dane and Travis Kelly shimmy into black wet suits, slip their feet into fins, fasten dive computers to their wrists and secure their breathing apparatuses. “Stay together,” their dad, Danny, says more than once, even though his boys are grown men—41 and 38, respectively—and accomplished at their craft. “We will,” Travis promises. He’s the bolder of the two and likely the message’s intended recipient. Today’s dive is ambitious, even for advanced practitioners—190 feet, roughly half the length of a football field and 60 feet beyond the stopping point for American recreational divers.

The brothers grab their spearguns; roll over the railing of their quad-engine powerboat, *Pile Driver*; and splash into the cerulean sea. From the deck, Danny and his sister Kathryn, watch, tracking bubble trails from their exhalations. “They’re staying together real good,” Danny observes, satisfied.

Below the surface, Dane and Travis propel downward, the watery world darkening as they descend. They savor the silence. At the bottom, they split up, spearguns cocked, to explore opposite ends of an area where fish like to breed.

Out of the corner of his eye, Travis spies a massive shape. Down here, everything is reduced to shadow, but he knows its silhouette. The protruding lower jaw, the spiky-looking fins—black grouper. A dinosaur of a beast, the biggest he’s ever seen, Travis thinks. The state lists the record for a black grouper catch at 113 pounds and 6 ounces. Surely, this one is even bigger.

Travis closes in ...



Few pastimes transcend generations as well as spearfishing has for Fort Myers’ deep-rooted Kelly family. Patriarch Ed Kelly started the tradition, with a speargun gifted by his wife, Mary, in the 1950s. Today, two of his children—including The Heights Foundation founder, Kathryn, and Kelly Brothers Inc. marine contracting co-founder Danny—and two grandchildren continue to chase underwater adventure with zeal.



Growing up, the Kelly kids' playground was aboard their father's 19-foot *Pooped Pappy*. "There was no teaching," Danny jests. Ed dove in and expected the kids to join. From left: Kathryn with Danny's sons, Dane and Travis; modern-day equipment; Danny with Travis and Dane; Danny and Kathryn's sisters, Karen and Lori, with their friend, Cole, between them, as kids.

This is a fish tale, although maybe not the one you expect. It is more memoir than whopper, a story centered around family, friendship, food, Florida and the bonds forged through a beloved pastime.

The Kellys, for whom Fort Myers' Kelly Road is named, are among Lee County's old guard and known for impassioned ventures. The clan established itself here in 1925, when Kathryn and Danny's grandparents migrated from raucous Key West to Fort Myers, a community more appropriate for rearing their clan of 12 children, including the siblings' father Ed. After serving in World War II, Ed married Mary and joined his twin brother in potato farming along Daniels Parkway—back then, a dirt road to nowhere.

The family's spearfishing legacy began with a gift. In the 1950s, Mary got Ed a speargun from the local hardware store. The device propels sharp-tipped steel shafts into prey, making spearfishers more akin to hunters than anglers. Ed was hooked. In the late '50s and early '60s, before Lee County's population boom, inland waters

teemed with bounty; today, the family travels some hundred miles offshore to find gamefish and avoid human congestion.

In time, Ed acquired a set of goggles, taught himself to hold his breath and learned to hunt underwater. He'd bag massive goliath groupers (there were no catch limits then) and mount them on pilings where tourists snapped photos as they rode the ferry to and from Sanibel. Later, he shared his passion with his kids, loading them onto his 19-foot boat, the *Pooped Pappy*, every chance he got.

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We've gathered at Lazy Flamingo restaurant in Fort Myers so I can get to know the family before we venture out to sea. Danny, 73, the second of Mary and Ed's six children, has eyes that twinkle with boyish mischief. He's a 'cowboy' of a diver, who seems to relish prolonged battles with game fish—at least according to Kathryn, 69. She, conversely, is more studied and precise. Until her two adopted

Candice Heizmann (3); Courtesy Kathryn Kelly

sisters joined the family, she was the only girl, and her turn with the family speargun always came last as outings neared their end. "It made me fast and accurate," she says. She earned a diving certification as a teenager to prove her mettle to her late parents, who were reluctant to let their daughter go offshore without them.

I am curious how Ed passed on his self-taught spearfishing skills. "I'm so glad you asked about that," Danny says. "But there's nothing to talk about. There was no teaching!" The family erupts into laughter. Ed dove right in and expected his kids to follow. He was quiet, patient and kind, Kathryn says. You could learn a lot from just watching him. When she bought a boat, she modeled her conduct as captain after her dad's—monitoring her passengers' safety and catering to their needs. "I just wanted everyone to have a good time," she says.

Mary didn't fish, but she turned the excursions' bounties into parties. On Sundays after church, she threw fish fries for dozens of family members and friends. There was never a concern

about having too many people. "We grew up eating fried fish, fried scallops, fried shrimp, fried pork chops, chicken fried steak, fried tomatoes," Kathryn says. "Now, we grill everything," Dane interjects. That's not the only element that's evolved. When Kathryn, Danny and their siblings were kids, they stuffed rocks in their pockets in lieu of weighted belts. As we head out on the boat a few weeks later, it takes a full hour to pack all the high-end gear.

Dane and Travis, the youngest of Danny's five, inherited their father's wiry athleticism, an advantage in mastering the sport's grueling physicality. These third-generation Kelly spearfishers are advanced scuba divers—the style they use on deep dives, like the 190-foot plunge, is a testament to that—but they prefer freediving without tanks, which requires mastery of breath, movement and aim. Inseparable since childhood, they learned to swim practically as early as they learned to walk. When they were about 10, Danny strapped tiny tanks on their backs and led

Travis, a bold adventurer in the water, loves the thrill of the hunt, even under intense circumstances. "You're chasing a hope that something crazy will happen," he says. Their efforts yield hefty red snapper, black grouper and permit.



them under for a real dive. “It was very much, ‘I do this, and if you’d like to follow, you are more than welcome to,’” Dane says, grinning. On one dive, they remember reaching the bottom and looking for Dad, who was nowhere to be found.

“I was fishin’!” Danny exclaims.

Later, in private, Dane and Travis dote on their dad. “My dad had friends, but growing up, he always took us fishing, always took us diving,” Dane says. His brother concurs. “We were his partners,” Travis says. “Even when we were young, he treated us that way.”

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Dawn breaks pink over Fort Myers Beach on the morning of our midsummer excursion. The weather report, which Dane has been monitoring for days, remains favorable for the 12-plus hour trip. Anticipation fills the air. The Kellys love spearfishing for the thrill of the unknown. “You’re chasing a hope that something crazy will happen,” Travis says.

They’ve endured boat breakdowns, sandbar collisions and storms that emerged out of nowhere. In the ’70s, Kathryn kept

a semi-automatic rifle on board in case of run-ins with drug smugglers, a common threat in those days. Underwater, they’ve encountered sharks—lots of them. Dane and Travis once came across a great white while diving a shipwreck in the Gulf. The magnificent beast was uninterested in the divers, unlike the bull shark that once charged at Travis, veering off just before they collided. Kathryn recalls the time she got entangled in gear while towing several dead, bleeding fish. She freed herself just before a shark got close enough to take a chomp.

Experiences at sea have shaped the Kellys’ lives on land. “I love challenges,” says Danny, who scraped boats as a kid, worked salvage dives as a young man, and with his younger brother, Tim, founded Kelly Brothers Inc., growing it into the region’s dominant marine contractor. Dane and Travis now run the 45-year-old company, which is behind countless projects like the 2015 Naples Pier reconstruction and the creation of Florida Gulf Coast University’s Kimberly’s Reef, an artificial reef where researchers investigate everything from water quality to ecosystem health. Diving cemented Travis and Dane’s brotherly bond and bestowed critical skills,

Courtesy Kathryn Kelly; Candice Heizmann (3)

including crisis management, problem-solving and, above all else, communication. “We can have a whole conversation underwater with a few hand or eye signals that no one else could understand,” Travis explains.

For their aunt Kathryn, adversity underwater gave her the tenacity to see a dream to completion. Trained as an architect, Kathryn founded The Heights Foundation, which celebrated its 25th anniversary in 2024. The grassroots nonprofit provides educational and social services to Harlem Heights, one of Lee County’s most impoverished neighborhoods, which borders the family’s namesake Kelly Road. “When I get into a difficult situation at work, I think about how I’ve been in way more difficult situations underwater,” she says. “When people—mostly men of a certain age—are condescending or really difficult, I think about when I’ve been underwater with speared fish and sharks swimming around. You don’t scare me, buddy!” The same grit served her well when she persuaded a male-led diving club to let her enter spearfishing competitions. The year they relented, she earned second place. A few competitions later, she took first.

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The Gulf of Mexico’s floor is like a shallow, sandy bowl, largely devoid of marine life, until you encounter the places where fish-friendly habitats develop. These include reefs, ledges and other ‘structures,’ like a sunken piece of concrete or exposed rock where plants and microorganisms take root and fish can hide, feed and spawn. Aside from one’s physical prowess, aim and accuracy, the key to successful spearfishing is finding these hotspots—and keeping them secret.

On the *Pile Driver*, the sonar suddenly illuminates, signaling a massive population of fish below. “Don’t write down the coordinates,” Dane instructs, glancing at my notebook. A location like this rock ledge—a virgin spot not fished before—is a gold mine, and they’ve been saving it for today. The family uses GPS and sonar to record as many potential spots as possible, rotating among them as a safeguard against overharvesting.

Dane worries they’ll encounter thermoclines, where cold, deep water mixes with warm, near-surface water, resulting in limited visibility. “Or, it could be a beautiful dive,” his brother pipes in.

Fishing has always been a communal affair for the Kellys. Back in the day, Mary turned the bounty from Ed (far left, with his twin brother, Tom) and the kids’ excursions into fish fries for friends and family. Now, Dane and Travis bring the day’s catch home for their daughters.



Spearfishing takes tactility—the sharp-tipped steel shafts make the wielder more akin to hunter than angler. The Kellys are strategic about their hunting grounds, rotating between locations to prevent overharvesting and safeguarding the coordinates for untapped spots, like the one they visited with our writer.

“You divers ready?” Danny asks. “What’s your estimated time?”
“About 25 minutes,” Dane replies. Danny sets a timer.

Travis glances at his dad. “Now, don’t leave us,” he teases. The brothers roll overboard, splitting the family between two worlds.

On the surface, Danny and Kathryn make small talk, though I don’t think their eyes ever leave the water. “Look!” Kathryn exclaims. A red snapper her nephew shot rises to the surface, affixed to a yellow flotation device. “Beautiful!” she declares, hauling it on board.

Below, a different story unfolds. As Dane descends, an unwelcome—but not unfamiliar—feeling takes hold: narcosis, a temporary condition brought on by changes in pressure and the amount of nitrogen in the bloodstream. It strikes at random, affecting divers on some trips. It feels like being drunk. On top of that, Dane correctly anticipated the thermoclines. Visibility diminishes.

Dane never sees the massive shadow as the brothers descend 190 feet. Travis, meanwhile, stares in near disbelief at the black grouper of mythic proportions. “It was so big. It didn’t blend in with the fish around it,” he remembers. “It was almost like it was in the wrong ecosystem.” Travis has bagged more big, black grouper than most divers, but that dinosaur of a creature would be an accomplishment even for him.

The grouper slips beneath a ledge. Travis follows. He flips on a flashlight. Nothing. “Brand new! The light just died,” he laments. He decides to go for it anyway and aims into the darkness.

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Twelve hours and a cooler full of fish later, the *Pile Driver* returns to the dock. Kathryn had treated the group to homemade ceviche on deck using chunks of freshly caught permit, a gamefish with delicate, mild flesh. Their haul includes a big, black grouper that she and Danny tag-teamed. He’d wounded it; she delivered the fatal shot.

For Danny, spearfishing allows him to give his kids, and now his grandkids (Travis’ two daughters and Dane’s middle girl are certified divers) the kind of memories he cherishes from childhood. For Kathryn, the excursion is a celebration of family. “It’s been a long time since I was out on the boat with the boys, and I can’t remember the last time I went out with Danny,” she says.

Travis flashes a wry grin and offers a different take.

“It was an almost epic day,” he says.

“Almost?” I press.

He nods. The big fish had gotten away. ■



