



## FOOD! DRINKS! DRAGONS!

THE ANNUAL DRAGON BOAT FESTIVAL WILL BENEFIT THE GULF COAST KID'S HOUSE

BY HEIDI TRAVIS

**DERIVED FROM THE DUANWU FESTIVAL IN CHINA, WHICH OCCURS ON THE FIFTH DAY OF THE FIFTH MONTH OF THE TRADITIONAL CHINESE CALENDAR, PENSACOLA'S ANNUAL DRAGON BOAT FESTIVAL PUTS A LOCAL SPIN ON THE WHOLE SPECTACLE.** The all-day festival, which takes place September 9 at Bayou Texar, includes music, food, and children's games, but most of the excitement will come from the main event—the dragon boat race!

The dragon boats, 40-foot long canoes fashioned with elaborate dragon mastheads, are the stars of the show. The race pits over 40 teams of 20 oarsmen and women against each other in a heated contest set to the beat of their own drums—literally. Each

crew includes a drummer, pounding out a rhythm to which the team will stroke their way to the finish line.

Training for this event is intense and takes place over several months. Synchronization is the key to success—that, and more than a little elbow grease. The team that can work together to keep pace to the rhythm of the drum and cut the 300 meters across Bayou Texar first is the winner.

But it isn't all just fun and games.

The Dragon Boat Festival is organized by Northwest Pensacola SERTOMA, a non-profit international organization of businesses and professionals working towards community improvement. They raise money through events like these for community service projects. Once again, the profits of the event this year will go towards the Gulf Coast Kid's House, a non-profit organization that provides support to victims of child abuse. As an advocacy center, Gulf Coast Kid's House provides a safe-haven for children of abuse while also providing the professional resources needed for investigating and prosecuting cases of child abuse. The organization also provides access to mental health counseling for the families they serve. Last year, SERTOMA raised over \$30,000 for the Gulf Coast Kid's House through this event.

Stacey Kostevicki, Executive director of Gulf Coast Kid's House is very enthusiastic about the upcoming event. She sees not only as a way to help her organization, but also as an event that enriches the local community through team work and a little friendly competition.

"The Dragon Boat Festival is a really fun way to pull the community together for a competitive day on the water. The SERTOMA group just has a way of getting

things done. With their brains and the sweat equity from our volunteers, staff and board, it is a match made in heaven," Kostevicki says.

It's due to the hard work of their volunteers and sponsors that this event has successfully grown over time. As the enthusiasm for this event continues to gain momentum, the hope is that more people will be drawn out in support of this cause. Currently, the goal is to expand from 40 to 70 participating teams and to draw crowds of up to 10,000 spectators.

Meanwhile, those already committed to the cause are always ready to try new ways to raise funds to help support organizations like Gulf Coast Kid's House.

"It has come so far in the last few years – in large part due to the community support seen from Wind Creek and other corporate sponsors," Kostevicki says. "This year, the Northeast Pensacola SERTOMA is trying a team fundraising approach—we've seen it be successful in other races across the country."

The Dragon Boat Race holds a special place in Kostevicki's heart for other reasons as well.

"It is really meaningful to me in the sense that GCKH comes together as a team—'Forty Arms of Fury'—and gets to bond with the Cordova Rotary Dragonflies—who I'm a member of and who meet at GCKH," Kostevicki says.

This year's proceeds will go towards increased safety and security at Gulf Coast Kid's House, so come out and give them some support! Just pick up an oar or cheer from the shore!

## ON YOUR MARK, GET SET, GIVE

### THE CAPT'N FUN'S BUSHWACKER 5K WILL BENEFIT BIG BROTHERS BIG SISTERS OF NORTHWEST FLORIDA

BY HEIDI TRAVIS

**THIS MONTH, GIVING BACK IS AS EASY AS LACING UP YOUR RACING SHOES! CAPT'N FUN'S AND BIG BROTHERS BIG SISTERS OF NORTHWEST FLORIDA ARE TEAMING UP AT CAPT'N FUN'S BUSHWACKER 5K ON AUGUST 5.** The race begins at 7:30 am sharp at the South Santa Rosa Recreation Center and finishes at Capt'n Fun Beach Club where there will be an after party. All proceeds of the race will benefit Big Brothers Big Sisters.

The Bushwacker 5K is put on by the Capt'n Fun Runners, who have been running and hosting events for just about 30 years. Johnny Graves, a long-time member of the group once served on the board of Big Brothers Big Sisters and orchestrated their partnership with the Capt'n Fun Runners. Last year, they raised over \$200,000 dollars for Big Brothers Big Sisters and he says they hope to raise just as much this year. This is a cause Graves makes clear is close to his heart.

"As long as we keep doing it, the run will benefit Big Brothers Big Sisters," Graves says.

Just the same, Graves is insistent that he and his group do not "go it alone." He is very quick to point out that they've had tremendous support from the community and a lot of good help.

"We're kind of the driving force but we've got a really good relationship with the city of Gulf Breeze and their police department, Santa Rosa Island Authority, Escambia County Police Department, and Running Wild. We've been working with those guys since it all started. They help us, provide us with a lot of equipment and support," Graves says.

Big Brothers Big Sisters of Northwest Florida has served the Pensacola area for over 28 years. They are a non-profit organization whose mission is to aid troubled children, typically from single-parent homes, and to provide guidance and one-on-one support. Big Brothers Big Sisters pairs an adult mentor, a Big, with a specific child, a Little, for monthly outings and activities they can enjoy together.

According to Hannah Yager, Marketing and Special Events Coordinator at Big Brothers Big Sisters, these activities work to build a healthy, supportive connection with a child, which is exactly what these children need.

"They may do a variety of activities together from working on school work to going to the beach. It's all about developing a lasting friendship which will allow the mentors to encourage their Littles to succeed in life," Yager says.

Relationship building is at the core of Big Brothers Big Sister's mission. Yager says it is these bonds which nurture the children and have the power to change their lives for the better. To these children, just being seen and heard can make all the difference.

To be a Big Brother or Big Sister is not a complicated process, though it does have a few easy steps. Bigs must go through a volunteer screening process which involves an online application, solid references, a background check, and an interview. Once this screening process is complete, the organization pairs the Big with their Little.

Last year, the organization helped 650 children in Northwest Florida. Yet, according to Yager, it's just not enough. An organization like this requires ample

funding and manpower. That's why events like the Bushwacker 5K are so important. With the support of the community, keeping an organization like Big Brothers Big Sisters afloat becomes a much easier task. Among other things, proper funding helps to streamline the process of matching Bigs to their Littles.

"We depend on the money from fundraisers like the Bushwacker 5K to cover background screenings for volunteers and continued support for each relationship by a match specialist," Yager says.

But it isn't only the screenings that can be costly. Simply maintaining the relationships between the Bigs and the Littles can be an enormous drain on their budget. The cost of a single match is staggering.

"The proceeds from the Bushwacker 5K will allow us to match more children with caring, adult mentors. The average cost to support a match for one year is \$1,000," Yager says.

And that's only one match. With an area as large as Northwest Florida to serve, Big Brothers Big Sisters can use as many hands on deck as they can get. Unfortunately, help just seems to run a bit thin the days.

"We are ALWAYS in need of more mentors. Our waiting list of children who are waiting for a Big hovers around 200," Yager says.

All the same, you don't have to be a Big to help the Littles. Just showing up on race day can go a long way to help this cause. You can have fun and make a difference. Remember every "Little" bit counts, so grab your sneakers, and get to the starting line.

