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SPONTANEOUS COMMUNITY SUPPORT

SGI Charity Chili Cookoff – Neighbors Helping Neighbors

It was one of those spontaneous things that usually only happens in a remote, sparsely populated community. Like St. George Island was in the 1980's. The first bridge to the Franklin County barrier island had just been built in 1965 and there just weren't a whole lot of folks who were willing to live in a then economically depressed area way, way off the beaten path.

A mobile home had caught fire on the island and it and all of its contents were immediately consumed. Friends of the home owners gathered at a local pub called Harry A's and lamented their plight. Someone or everyone suggested that they should have a fundraiser for the folks. Spontaneous community support!

Everyone headed home and gathered a few personal belongings and quickly returned. They auctioned the items off to each other. Food was prepared, purchased and consumed. Someone turned the label of a Budweiser beer bottle upside down and claimed it was a rare collector's item. It was sold; donated back and resold several times.

Thus the tradition of opening the auction portion of the St. George Island Charity Chili Cookoff with a bidding war for a rare upside-down –label Bud bottle was born and continues to this day more than a couple decades later.

The always first Saturday in March Annual Charity Chili Cookoff signals the start of spring on the Island and the Forgotten Coast. Thousands converge from throughout Florida and the Southeastern United States to participate and make their donation to the SGI volunteer fire department and first responders unit. Plus eat some chili and have some fun while doing it.

In 1992 the state recognized the effort of the island's all volunteer Cookoff crew by naming it the "Florida Rural Community of the Year" winner. A sign on the right hand side of the road when leaving the island attests to the well-earned distinction.

There are several activities leading up to the big day, including an arts and antiques preview, but the really big day is that Saturday. Things get underway with a foot race around the island. International Chili Society (ICS) chefs from across the country start erecting their clever theme booths. All proceeds from their efforts go to the cause.

They have a lot of fun but this is also serious business. The winner gets a little check but also earns the right to compete in the national chili cooking championships. This has evolved into the largest ICS sanctioned regional in all of the United States. Upwards of 75 ICS chefs compete. There is also an amateur division.

The large volunteer cadre of chili judges swears that all 75 or so pro entries taste entirely different.

Revelers can purchase small “tastes” of the pro efforts and make their own personal choices.

A “Mister Hot sauce” and “Miss Chili Pepper” competition is held and the cleverest antics are rewarded.

And then there’s the auction, where the really big bucks are raised in just a few hours. Donations come in from across the island and mainland. Ranging from frivolous to seriously valuable. Absentee homeowners donate free weekends and even a week in their domiciles. Charter Captains donate fishing trips. There is art and antiques. Some participate to try and spot a bargain while others find it a highly entertaining way to contribute to a great cause.

Those new to the auction are often amazed that the least valuable of items often bring the biggest bucks. Spontaneous community support!

An old goat (the animal kind) once brought close to a \$1,000. For weeks afterward he could be seen grazing the roadsides of the island. Finally he was formally adopted and given a new home in Sopchoppy. A pair of loudly honking geese also tipped the scales for about the same bid. The husband was doing the bidding while all the time his spouse was shooting him daggers. Just good “acting” we guessed as they still reside (together) on the island.

And then there was the ornately carved walking cane. It was “re-gifted” several times over the years and raised an absolute ton of money. The county sheriff’s hat has been put up for bid more times than you can count and several television personalities make it a point to always be on hand to raise a few dollars.

All of the fire departments in Franklin County are of the “volunteer” nature. And when it comes to raising funds they are mostly left on their own. Over the years the Cookoff has raised a whole lot of money. But it also takes a great a great deal of money to build a new firehouse and properly and safely equip the volunteers.

And as a bonus, generous island residents have lower insurance rates and mainland volunteer fire departments and first responders get any and all help they might need from the St. George Island team when an emergency arises. Spontaneous community support! -30-

