

Conversation with the Commodore

Written by Editor
Monday, 15 July 2013 13:12 -



Commodore Dan Thompson and his wife Bonnie, both former marines living in Beaufort since 1987, have been volunteering with the Water Festival for 13 years. Dan has worked for Hargray for 22 years and is their Central Office Manager. He spends his "free time" working as a reserve police officer for Beaufort City, "making sure everybody's safe." Communications and safety? Seems like a pretty good background for a Water Festival Commodore. We spoke to him about the festival, the role of Commodore, and a desert tortoise named Elvis.

Q. Before now, what was the most challenging position you'd held with Water Festival?

A. Definitely Program Coordinator. That person is typically in line to be the next commodore, and has oversight over all the other coordinators. By the time you make it to Program Coordinator, you want to make sure you've done most of the other jobs, so you know what it takes to do them. As Commodore, you'll end up deciding who goes into what position and you want to make sure you have the right people in the right places.

Q. How much time do the coordinators put into the festival each year? How big a commitment is it?

A. Well, we have our first meeting at the end of August, and meet once a month through December. After that, it's every two weeks until the festival starts. But those meetings are just a chance to catch everybody up and report on what you've accomplished since the last meeting. Everybody's doing their work on weekends and at night. It's hard to say how many hours, per

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se, because different positions have different demands at different times throughout the year. But no matter what position you're in, it's a huge time commitment.

Q. As Commodore, what is your role, exactly? Is it "hands-on" or more of a figurehead position? For many folks in the community, it's a title shrouded in mystery!

A. It's definitely hands-on. Basically, everything that happens at the Festival happens at the discretion of the Commodore. I guess you'd say the festival is the Commodore's vision. The entertainment, the events, the theme, the tee-shirt design, the bumper stickers it was all up to me this year. Or, I should say, my wife and I! As you might imagine, the First Ladies have a big impact.

Q. So, the Commodore chooses the entertainment?

A. Well, we have a committee, but yes, it's ultimately my decision. We were lucky to get Chris Cagle for the Concert in the Park this year. He's a pretty big deal in country music; he's had several hits. For whatever reason, he decided to take a few years off and just write music. After releasing a new album, he's just gone back on tour, so we got him at a good time. One thing we pride ourselves on is getting really good entertainment while keeping ticket prices affordable for the community.

Q. We're curious about the Pirettes. How does one go about getting that gig?

A. It's a lot like trying to get a job. The girls have to fill out an application, present two reference letters and a resume. Then we interview each girl, and we treat those interviews just like job interviews. We're looking for young ladies (in 9th or 10th grade) who are good students, and want to volunteer in their community. Some years, we've had as many as 20 Pirettes. This year we have 15, chosen from over 40 applicants. We get a lot of great applications. It's a tough decision.

Q. And what are their responsibilities?

A. They're basically ambassadors for the Water Festival. They attend various events and parades throughout the year, representing the festival. During the festival itself, their main function is to greet the public, answers questions, and help out in any way they can.

Q. We hear it takes about 400 volunteers to pull this thing off. What keeps the festival volunteers coming back, year after year? What has kept you coming back?

A. For me, when all's said and done, it's that feeling of being a part of something so big and knowing you helped to put on a great festival. And, of course, the friendships you make. I work in Bluffton, so lots of these people I wouldn't even know if it weren't for Water Festival. It's a lot of work, but it's a lot of fun.

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Q. You said something earlier about designing the tee-shirts. This year's design is great! Tell us about it.

A. We wanted this year's design to depict the festival itself. Local artist Mary Tibault painted all the different festival scenes for the shirt. You see that big tortoise on the right?

Q. Tortoise? We assumed that was a Loggerhead turtle.

A. Nope. That was my daughter's pet Desert Tortoise, Elvis. When she got him, you could hold him in your hand. Five years later, he weighed 50 pounds. He made his debut at last year's festival during Kid's Day and was a big hit. Unfortunately, we had a house fire last fall, and Elvis didn't make it.

Q. Oh, no! So, the image on the tee-shirt is sort of a tribute to Elvis?

A. That's right. But there's good news. We have a new 50 lb tortoise named Dozer, he'll be appearing at this year's festival. The bad news is that these tortoises can grow up to 250 pounds.

Q. Good luck with that. So, after your reign ends this year, what's next? What's life like for a past Commodore?

A. Well, I'll be Chairman of the Board for the Executive Committee. Executive Committee members are Past Commodore's and the immediate advisors to the Commodore.

Q. And you'll get to be a Whistler, right?

A. Yeah, I'm not looking forward to that so much.

Q. Why not?

A. Off the record, I don't dance.

Q. Does that really have to be off the record?

A. I guess not. Fortunately, the Whistlers don't have that many moves.