

Causeway Kayakers paddle the Sound to raise \$\$ for charities

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On Saturday, July 28, Walter Hotz will wake up at the crack of dawn to kayak across the Long Island Sound, from Norwalk to Crab Meadow in Huntington, N.Y., and back. The 74-year-old Stamford resident will not make this arduous 12-mile journey on his own - he'll be joined by a flotilla of more than 300 other paddlers participating in Kayak for a Cause. The group hopes to raise \$1 million for local charities.

After a physically demanding day on the water, Hotz will celebrate his achievement with thousands of area residents at a beach party in Veteran's Park in South Norwalk featuring The Neville Brothers and Ryan Shaw.

Hotz, a retired healthcare administrator and businessman, is an avid outdoorsman who lives part of the year in Florida and teaches kayaking as a hobby. This will be his second year paddling for KFAC and he has recruited several friends to join the event.

"I love the personal challenge and enjoyed sharing the experience with so many other people. But my main motivation is to help the charities," he says.

Every year, KFAC leadership selects five local charities. Paddlers can choose to kayak for one of the charities or pool the donations to be split among the charities. This year they include Hole in the Wall Gang, a summer camp in Ashford for children facing cancer and other life-threatening illnesses; Outward Bound of Connecticut; Cancer Care of Connecticut; Courage to Speak Foundation, a drug prevention organization for children; and Save the Sound, an environmental organization dedicated to the protection and restoration of the Long Island Sound.

Ginger Katz is founder of the Courage to Speak Foundation and co-author of "Sunny's Story," a book that tells the story of her son's heroin overdose from the perspective of the family beagle. Katz says that the funds raised by KFAC in the past have been incredibly significant. "KFAC has allowed us to expand our programs - we've developed an elementary curriculum."

KFAC began seven years ago as a lark between two adventurous friends, Miles Spencer of East Norwalk and Scott Carlin of Rowayton.

"Scott and I live in places where we can see Long Island. We thought 'Hey we can make it to the other side!' " says Spencer, an entrepreneur.

In August 2001, undiminished by their lack of experience, the two set off in their kayaks

to cross the Sound. They enjoyed the experience so much that over the next couple of years they invited others to join, raised funds for their favorite charities and were cheered on as intrepid adventurers by people on the coastline.

"People like me love adventure, but we especially love adventure with a purpose. I think we were doing something a lot of other people were already thinking of doing. KFAC gives people a way to accomplish a goal together," says Spencer.

Spencer also believes that KFAC has tapped into a growing popularity of kayaking. "Kayaking is a great way to be on the water and get a good workout. And it's also not an exclusive sport; you don't have to be an expert," he says.

In 2005, KFAC was approached by Nautica and GQ to join forces. "We were looking to partner on an achievement-oriented event like this around the water. If we didn't find KFAC, we would have started something like it ourselves. People run, walk and bike for a cause, why not paddle?" says New Canaan resident Peter Hunsinger, vice president and publisher of GQ.

Hunsinger has participated in the event for past two years. This year, he'll be paddling with his 16-year-old daughter, Emma, and 17-year-old son, Tim.

"KFAC makes for a perfect summer day - on the water during the day, great party at night, and all for a good cause," he says.

With corporate sponsorship, KFAC was able to grow into a major charity event. In one year, KFAC went from 45 to 178 paddlers. Nautica, GQ and other sponsors such as Land Rover were able to inject financial resources and provide event-planning teams and memorabilia. Last year, 300 paddlers participated and raised nearly half a million dollars for charity.

"We want people to have a good time and come back again and again," says Wilton resident Chris Fuentes, Nautica vice president of marketing.

Fuentes oversees dozens of events for Nautica but believes KFAC is special because it has an organic feel. "This event has so much heart and soul - after all, it was started by two neighborhood guys with a vision."

As KFAC has grown, it has become more logistically challenging. This year, 200 volunteers will heave kayaks off trucks, help paddlers launch and disembark safely, follow paddlers in chase boats and plan the party.

KFAC organized a safety clinic in early July for less-experienced paddlers. "Our goal is to get everyone across and back. We have a great team in place," says Spencer, who started Carpe Paddlum Foundation Inc. under which KFAC now operates.

This is the first year that KFAC will take place at Veteran's Park. The launch is scheduled

for 7:30 a.m. In previous years, kayaks launched from Calf Pasture Beach in Norwalk. According to Spencer, the city of Norwalk approached KFAC about using Veteran's Park. The move has allowed the event, and especially the beach party, to expand further.

The beach party begins at 5 p.m.; general admission to the concert costs \$25; blanket-level access, free beverages and a blanket cost \$50; a Stew Leonard's picnic basket for two costs \$150; and entry to the VIP tent for a lobster dinner costs \$500.

In addition to the concert by The Neville Brothers, there will be a Charity Carnival at the beach party. The five selected charities will each have a booth with physical challenges and prizes, in addition to information about their organizations.

During last year's event, Spencer recalls being on the water in his kayak and seeing hundreds of paddlers around him. "It is truly an awesome sight."

For information about Kayak for a Cause, visit www.kfac.com. Although paddler registration is closed, there is still a need for volunteers and chase boats. Contact KFAC through its Web site.

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Participants line up for last year's Kayak for a Cause.
(Contributed photo)

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Peter King Hunsinger, GQ vice president and publisher, paddles the Sound with his son, Tim, last year. (Contributed photo) July 15, 2007

Kayak for a Cause in the Sunday Stamford Advocate and the Norwalk Advocate