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Kayaks and Causes

By Brian Brennan

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What was sparked by two guys' unwillingness to back down from a bet has, seven years later, evolved into a hip annual event with high-profile corporate sponsors and hundreds of donors and participants.

In August of 2001, Scott Carlin and Miles Spencer, both of Southern Connecticut, sat with a friend who was visiting from Oyster Bay and gazed lazily out over the Long Island Sound. One or the other of them mused aloud that, though they had only kayaked once before, they could probably manage a kayak trip across the Sound to their friend's hometown.

Their friend – whom Spencer is tempted to name but doesn't – bet them that they couldn't. They told her to put her money where her mouth was, and a fifty-dollar bet was made.

The two made it across and that first endeavor was the progenitor of this year's Nautica\GQ Kayak for a Cause VII (KFAC).

After the first journey across, more acquaintances offered them bets to repeat it, while others expressed interest in joining in. It was decided before long to make it an annual event and donate the money to charity. Participation grew rapidly.

"I think a lot of people in Connecticut and Long Island look across the Sound and say 'Hmmm, I wonder if I could do that'. But it's little scary to do alone," Spencer says.

After a couple of years, GQ (whose vice-president and publisher, Peter King Hunsinger, lives in Connecticut and takes part in the event) and Nautica (whose vice-president of marketing, Chris Fuentes, does likewise) got in touch and, according to Mr. Spencer, have been instrumental in allowing them to expand KFAC.

The event today

At this year's event, 316 people were game enough to kayak from Calf Pasture Beach in Norwalk to Crabmeadow Beach in Huntington to raise money for five selected charities. There were 325 volunteers helping to make the day possible, and 4,500 who were happy to buy tickets for the after-party.

In addition to the sponsors, there were approximately 5,000 donors, many of whom sponsored specific teams or kayaker.

There is even a foundation – "Carpe Paddlum" – behind the event.

"The first year, we went to Lloyd's Neck," Spencer says. "Then we found out that there were bars in Bayville."

And so, for a couple of years, Wall's Wharf was the venue for the growing band of kayakers to crown the day with beer and lobster.

The beer and lobster have remained a staple of the event, but by the fourth year, participation had grown to such an extent that it was necessary to land at Crabmeadow Beach in Huntington and return to Norwalk for the party.

The kayaks are stacked onto tractor trailers and the kayakers taken back across the Sound on party boats.

This year's party included a dunk tank; rock climbing walls; and golf, basketball and gyro challenges. Singer

Ryan Shaw (signed with the One Haven/Columbia label) opened the music portion of the event for the Neville Brothers. A JumboTron was present to give top-tier sponsors their money's worth. Kayakers and especially generous donors partied in a VIP ("very important paddler") section.

"We'd happily go back to Bayville if they could handle us, but it's crazy now," Spencer says.

The causes

A committee selects five charities each year based on an established criteria. Selected charities must benefit communities on the Sound and/or the Sound environment; as well as promote leadership skills and demonstrate effective management.

The charities benefiting from KFAC this year were: Hole in the Wall Gang, Outward Bound of Connecticut, Cancer Care of Connecticut, Courage to Speak Foundation, and Save the Sound. The amount of money raised for each has not yet been disclosed.

Hole in the Wall Gang is an association of summer camps established by actor Paul Newman for children with life-threatening diseases. The first camp was established in Ashford, Connecticut in 1987.

Save the Sound is an advocacy group devoted to preserving the Long Island Sound through education, activism and research. It was founded in 1972 as the Long Island Sound Task Force.

Ginger Katz, founder of Courage to Speak, knows what it is to see a grassroots cause take off. The organization is dedicated to creating greater dialogue about drug addiction through education and destigmatization.

Ms. Katz believes that such a dialogue might have saved the life of her son Ian, who died of an overdose in his bedroom at the family home in Norwalk in 1996 at age 20.

Ms. Katz wants parents who, like herself, were not exposed to a drug culture growing up to know what their children will be exposed to. She also wants young people to know of the dangers of drugs, the nature of addiction, and the resources and support available to them.

Courage to Speak offers a drug-prevention curriculum to elementary, middle and high schools; and is also launching a program for parents called "Courageous Parenting 101". Ms. Katz has also authored *Sunny's Story*, a children's book about her son's addiction.

The book is told from the perspective of the Beagle that the family adopted when Ian was small and that tried to wake her the night Ian died. Katz says it has already sold 600 copies and she is only just beginning to market it.

A Courage to Speak boardmember took part in Kayak for a Cause in previous years, and it was through this connection that the two charities found each other. KFAC provided the chance to promote her organization's objectives that Katz relishes.

"We're really grateful to Miles and Scott for their vision," she says. "From their vision, it's turned into quite an organization. A lot of people jump on board – no pun intended – and kayak for causes."

Upon reflection, Miles Spencer supposes that there is something of a surfer-like kayaker subculture.

"But kayaking's also very inclusive, very family, very environmentally sensitive," he says. "So what we've done with Kayak for a Cause is make it really accessible to a broad group of people."