

The Capital

Top Stories

Fleet blessing draws thousands to Shady Side

By DEBBIE HOUGH, For The Capital

Blessed by sunny skies and a break from the oppressive heat, about 5,000 people flocked to Shady Side yesterday for the annual Blessing of the Fleet and Seafood Festival.

They filled the bleacher-style seating along the Discovery Village shoreline to witness a parade of 20 boats being baptized by a fireboat's water cannon while men and women of the cloth bestowed blessings over a loudspeaker.

Later, the crowds munched on local delicacies and watched or participated in competitions celebrating waterman traditions.

"We were blessed with great weather and a record crowd," said Adam Hewison of Discovery Village, which hosted the event with support from local businesses.

The blessing was open to all boaters, and although only 14 signed up in advance, six boats later joined the snaking line of workboats and pleasure craft that cruised into the creek for blessings.

"Gracious God, we thank you for the blessing of this day, and we ask for the blessing of this boat, and for all of the catch it brings in this season, and for the captain and the crew, and all of the people who step on it, in Jesus name we pray, amen," said the Rev. Rebecca Iannicelli of Centenary United Methodist Church of Shady Side, presenting one prayer over the Miss Pam.

Minutes before, the Rev. William Pinkney, of the Shady Side House of Prayer, and assistant pastor at Cedar Grove, Jim Stafford, had prayed similar sentiments for The Traveler and Some Beach. In turn, the trio alternated, offering a personalized and spontaneous prayer for each of the boats that passed.

"None of it was scripted," said the Rev. Iannicelli. "It was a sacred moment for me, to be able to give thanks to God out here today."

As a dramatic touch to the blessing, the county's Lady Anne fireboat shot a 200-foot arc of water over Parrish Creek as each boat slowly passed. They came out glistening from the spray - most laden with guests - as boat horns honked and crews waved at shoreline spectators.

The blessings were just one of the attractions.

"I've already eaten four crabcakes, and boy were they good," boasted Jimmy Boarman through a broad grin. "You only go around once in life."

The waterman competitions drew many spectators at the family-oriented event.

Mr. Boarman, a volunteer at the event, took a break from his duties and crab cake consuming to watch his nephews - Raymond, 17, and Wade 14 - compete in the anchor toss.

"Come on, put some meat on it," he goaded loudly, with an enthusiasm as hearty as his appetite. He loitered on the sidelines even after his kin didn't win, explaining to bystanders the rules of the game.

"There's no windmilling, and it's the taller, skinnier, ones that end up winning," he said. "Well, sometimes, it's the big boys," he added, in a drawl. Each contestant got two tosses, and a rope marked off in duct-taped sections measured the distance.

His hedged prediction held true in one respect. It was hard to guess who would win.

As watermen and landlubbers competed side by side, broken into groups by gender and age only, adept anchor handlers and novices won in equal measure.

Phillip Smith beat out other teens with a 49-foot throw. "That was my first time ever trying it. My first time ever touching an anchor," the 17-year old from Denton said.

Capt. Tommy-Lou Hallock, a fifth-generation waterman on Parrish Creek, was best in his heat, with his 45-foot toss going eight feet further than his nearest contender.

His practiced pitch gave him first place honors at last year's festival, too. His stepson, Jacob Payne, 12, won the child's division with a 37-foot toss, a repeat of his winning 2004 performance when he threw 41-feet.

"You just throw it hard as you can," said Capt. Hallock, casually declining to share any secret to his technique.

Capt. Hallock also won the boat docking contest - for the third consecutive year - docking his workboat Grace in 26.7 seconds. "She's named for the grace of God," said Capt. Hallock, who was only slightly faster than his fellow waterman J.R. Gross, who came in second on the Miss Cindy in 29.5 seconds, followed by John Van Alstine on the Patricia Anne, the only other Parrish creek waterman who competed. The number of competitors in the boat docking competition was down from previous years.

"Maybe it's because it hasn't been too good a crabbing season, and they don't get paid for this," said Mr. Hewison, whose sentiment was echoed by Capt. Hallock.

"It's about economics. It's a bad crabbing year, and you could also damage your boat very easily," he said.

Still, crabcakes were plentiful, and proved as popular as the competitions. Whitman's Catering sold 200 by 4 p.m., and ran out of hot dogs and 80 pounds of pulled pork, and drained their supply of 20 gallons of lemonade by 2 p.m.

When a last minute snafu stalled boat shuttles from Clarks Landing, Bob Gallagher, the Rhode Riverkeeper, stepped in to save the day, ferrying visitors to and from Clarks Landing aboard his 20-foot center console boat.

"The weather was great, the people came out, everything worked out, and I'm so happy everything went as well as it did," Mr. Hewison said.

Debbie Hough is a freelance writer.

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