

Annual Duck Barbecue And Races Raise Funds For Camp

Organizers hope for good turnout Sunday

BY MICHELLE TRAURING

For 41 years and counting, it has never rained on the day of Camp Pa-Qua-Tuck's Duck Barbecue—or at least so they say.

Richard Santonocito, a Rotary Club of the Moriches member who is organizing this year's barbecue, is banking on clear and sunny skies this Sunday, September 12, when hundreds of campers, parents, community members and their growling stomachs will pile into the Center Moriches camp, a place grounded in tradition and open minds. The gates open at noon.

"This is a camp for special needs kids," Mr. Santonocito said of the camp, which relies on nearly \$650,000 in donations every year to operate. "That's why I'm here. When I came, I fell in love."

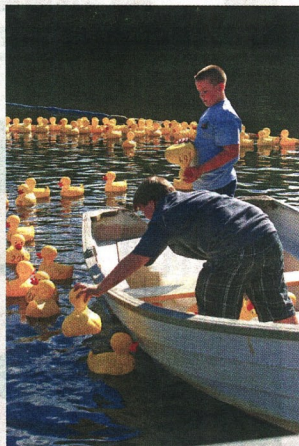
Annual barbecue-goers cross through the camp's gates in the afternoon knowing what to expect: duck dinners for \$35, or \$30 in advance, hamburgers, hot dogs, clams on the half-shell, potatoes, corn, cabbage and an array of beverages. And this year, there's a new meal on the menu: a chicken barbecue dinner for \$25.

"The duck here is really incredible. But even so, my wife's not thrilled with duck, and neither is my daughter, so it's probably a good thing we have chicken this year," Mr. Santonocito said with a laugh.

Each year, the Moriches Rotary Club,



Moriches Rotary Club members, left to right, Tom Chieffo, Steve Kronman and Ed Wesche man the grills at last year's barbecue. Right, Patrick Spellman, 12, left, and Josh Battenberg, 13, drop racing ducks in the water.



which runs the event, gets 700 ducks and cooks them above the open flames of an 80-foot-long barbecue pit.

The ducks—wrapped and seasoned—cook about 2 feet above the coals for almost three hours before they're served, said Thomas Chieffo, president of the camp's board of directors and a Moriches Rotary Club member.

"People who have tried duck and didn't like it have had this duck and loved it, just because of the way it's cooked," he said.

Last year, the Rotary Club raised about \$25,000 at the barbecue, Mr. Chieffo said, and

with 600 chicken dinners in addition to the duck, it could potentially raise even more.

"This barbecue provides a very important part of the funds it takes to run this camp," he said. "We hope to have as many people show up as possible."

Starting at noon, families can expect a day filled with food, music, magicians and games, including two bouncy-houses and the renowned big and small duck races, started 12 years ago by Rotary member Newton Homan.

The 350 big ducks—large, numbered rub-

ber ducks—sell for \$100 each. At 3 p.m., they will be loaded into a chute over Kaier's Pond and dumped into the water. The first one to cross the finish line wins.

"They race in an inverted 'V,'" Mr. Homan said. "They start at the widest end and the first duck to the point wins."

First prize is \$10,000, and second and third are \$3,000 and \$2,000, respectively. The small duck race (featuring smaller rubber ducks) kicks off the same way at 4 p.m. Each duck is \$10, and half of the race's proceeds are awarded to the top three winners. Remaining pro-



Duck Barbecue organizer Richard Santonocito explains how the ducks are cooked at Camp Pa-Qua-Tuck in Center Moriches. Right, Richard Halmo, 11, of Manorville chows down on a duck dinner during last year's barbecue.



MICHELLE TRAURING AND JENNETT MERIDEN RUSSELL PHOTOS

ceeds from both races are given to the camp.

Camp officials and Rotary members agree that the kids served by the camp are one of the biggest reasons they come back to work the barbecue, year after year.

"This place is like the best kept secret in Center Moriches," Mr. Santonocito said of the camp. "It's right here and no one knows about it. You watch these kids and your heart just goes out to them."

This will be Moriches Rotary Club President Bill LeMaire's sixth year helping at the barbecue—and this past summer was his son

Christopher's fifth year attending the camp.

"The camp is obviously a soft spot for all of us in the Rotary, especially for me because my son goes there and is autistic," he said. "The kids look so forward to going. It gives them their space for a week, a chance to go on vacation. It's a good feeling place."

Mr. LeMaire will be working the duck pit this year, alongside the camp's office manager, Johnneen Feehan, who will be helping to unwrap the ducks.

"Messy is the only word for it," she said, recalling her three years of experience. "You get

all greasy, but it's a lot of fun and you work with people from all over."

Ms. Feehan said on Tuesday morning, she received a call from a man living out-of-state who wanted to come back to the camp and work the barbecue like he used to when he was in high school. The man is now in his 40s. "Talk about legacy," Ms. Feehan said.

Along with Rotary and camp members, the local community—including foreign exchange students from around the world—

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comes together to lend a hand. Mr. Santonocito, who also ran the barbecue last year, said he is expecting more than 100 volunteers.

"You can't pull off something like this by yourself," he said. "It's a lot of work. Last year, I was nervous, but I always get nervous—and then perspire. I'm going to

bring two shirts to be safe, but in lighter colors than last year."

Mr. Santonocito said he has his nerves in check for now and knows the event will be a success. He aims to raise \$50,000 this year, rain or shine.

"The money is just going to such a good place," he said. "Some of these kids can't walk, talk, read. We're lucky, and when you see that, you just want to give back."