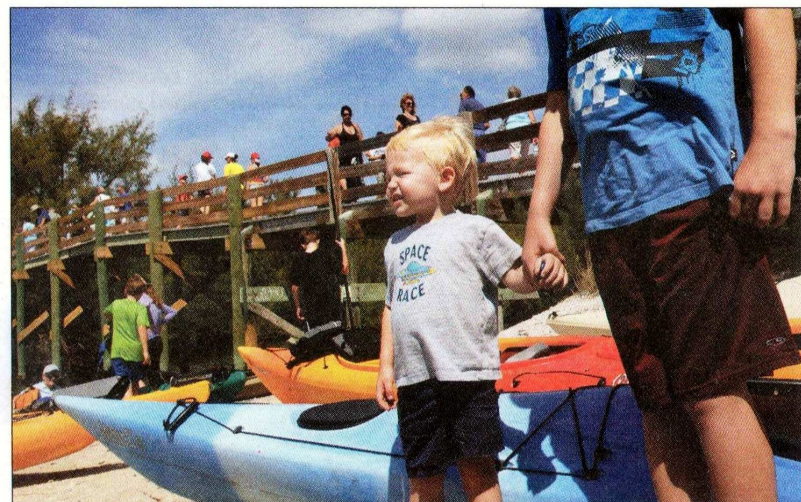


PEOPLE

Land Trust holds fifth 'Thank You' event



Kellen Miller, 2, holds brother Liam's hand during Indian River Land Trust's 5th annual membership event.

BY SAM ROHLFING BAITA
Correspondent

John Johnson was beaming.

The Indian River Land Trust, for which Johnson is a board member, just acquired 60 acres of lagoon shoreline property, on Pine Island south of the Wabasso Bridge, thereby advancing

its quest to preserve the county's endangered and still pristine natural wetlands and hammocks.

Johnson learned the land was available and put the plan together. Through an anonymous donation and with help from trust Treasurer Kelly Kite Jr., the property was acquired at a county auction. The purchase



The event included a barbecue lunch, live music, kayaking and guided walking tours. PHOTOS BY BENJAMIN HAGER

chase increased to almost 500 acres and 4 miles of shoreline property currently protected by the Trust.

Johnson was among staff, board and volunteers gathered at Round Island Riverside Park on Saturday for the organization's fifth annual membership "Thank You" party and lagoon celebration.

The day was sunny, breezy, Florida-perfect. Situated at the Indian River/St. Lucie County line, between A1A and the lagoon, the venue was a fine match for the event, just the sort of mangrove-rich, shoreline environment the trust strives to protect.

Trust Director Ken Grudens and Director of Land Protection Ralph Monticello were among staff and board welcoming attendees.

Friendly and well-organized, Ann Taylor is IRLT's director of development. She offered warm greetings and refreshments, and directed traffic. Guests could sign up for a kayak excursion, and colorful bunches of the slender craft bobbed about in the shallows.

Background music was provided by the banjo-led Porch Pickers, with back-up supplied by the whispering of the Australian pines. The towering Aussies are considered an invasive species, rudely slurping light from lower growing plants, but Florida old-timers often still have a nostalgic soft spot for the late 19th century imports.

Short guided tours were offered, and Robin Dunlap led the first one.

The group tromped across a wooden walkway and onto the crushed shell path that wound through the mangrove wetland toward the water.

Dunlap pointed out flora and fauna along the way - "Don't eat that" (green pods on a bush) "That's the Florida state butterfly," (The Zebra Longwing), "That's a Spiney-backed Orb

Weaver," (a little spider and its magnanimous opus, a glorious web, high above the path).

"It's a work of art!" said member Stella Covill.

Dunlap led the group to the observation tower, then up the sturdy steps to the top, offering an excellent view of the lagoon.

A wide stretch along the far shore, Dunlap explained, was the "South Vero Conservation Property," another IRLT acquisition, 185 acres bought in 2011. Located east of US 1, near the Oslo boat ramp, the property can't be seen from the highway.

When someone commented that it's good to be able to see what trust donation dollars actually buy, Bill Helmly spoke up. He is chairman of the trust board and, in his pleasant drawl, explained that the property had originally been listed for \$11 million. After the real estate market collapse, however, the acreage was eventually acquired for far less.

"We are," Helmly warned, "in a race against time, trying to acquire or preserve" these properties. "The pace is getting faster as we are trying to save what the rest of Florida has already lost." The IRLT's success, he told the group atop the tower, "is all because of you. Thank you!"

At midday, everyone gathered under the welcome shade of a long tent for a BBQ lunch catered by award-winning Hale Grove River Market. By mid afternoon, members had been, well and sincerely thanked and certainly went on their various ways with renewed dedication to preserving "what the rest of Florida has already lost."

Event sponsors included: Mr. and Mrs. Henry G. Stifel, Toni Robinson, Adventure Kayaking, Smith Heating & Air Conditioning, and Vero Marine. ■

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