

Freedom Excursions

By Bryan Custer, Hillsborough County Sheriff's Deputy, Founder of Freedom Excursions

Healing Heroes One Wave at a Time

In April of 2008, **Bryan Custer**, an Apollo Beach resident, started a non-profit, 501 C (3) organization by the name of Freedom Excursions. This organization provides, free of charge, injured American Veterans and active duty service members and their families going through rehabilitation at the James A. Haley VA Hospital, a cruise or fishing on Tampa Bay for a day. Although this effort appears to be recreational by its nature, we have been assured by many medical professionals participating in this endeavor that the emotional and therapeutic value of our outings is extremely valuable to their patients' rehabilitation. It enables their patients to get out of their hospital setting and day-to-day routine. Many of our guests have never been on a boat or experienced the exhilaration of catching a fish and dining on their "catch" for dinner while still on board. Our guests totally relax and enjoy their day of honor not being reminded of their disability and trauma they endure 24/7.

We currently have two sailboats and a pontoon boat that are privately owned, available for our use, as our fleet. Everyone involved has full-time jobs. **General George "Nordie" Norwood USAF** (retired), **Mike Byrnes**, **Matt Custer** (active military), and **Joan and John Mynahan**. All crew and captains are volunteers.

Freedom Excursions is limited to the number and type of outings that we can provide to our injured Warriors because we can only accommodate certain types of injuries, due to the type of vessels we have available for our use. For example, wheelchair patients currently can only be on board guests if they can transfer safely to another stationary chair on the vessel. This eliminates many of our heroes from participating with us. Some of the patients require a nurse, as well as a therapist, to accompany them. Our brain trauma injured heroes cannot tolerate the summer heat without air conditioning. Add the necessary crew, and a vessel can get crowded quite fast.

Over the past year, we have gained the trust of the doctors and therapists at the VA Hospital and have been approached by other Veteran's organizations to take out their patients and their families on the same trip.

One of the therapists that began coming out with us on various cruises in the beginning, has transferred to the Spinal Cord Injury division. He told us that in order to take out his patients, we would need a wheelchair accessible bathroom and air conditioning, as they cannot all control their body temperature, as well. Obviously, we needed to seek out an alternative vessel in order to fulfill the many needs of our heroes.

Well, we found the answers to our prayers. A gentleman in Cape Coral, Florida owns Stability Yachts. He has agreed to custom build Freedom Excursions a vessel to be named "Warrior's Angel" that will accommodate the needs of our heroes—wheelchair accessible, stern platform lift and boarding plank, completely handicap accessible and air-conditioned. While the new vessel is being built, he has agreed to let Freedom Excursions use his private vessel (a slightly smaller version of the one being designed for us and equipped for wheelchairs) so we can continue serving our military families with outings on the water at absolutely no cost to them. It's our way of thanking them for what they do.

The cost of the vessel is well over a million dollars. We are currently in the process of applying for a grant, but it will not cover the entire cost. The Foundation wants to see community collaboration, interest and support. The largest cost in the construction of the vessel is the labor. We are asking for volunteers to help offset the cost of the vessel. The vessel is being built in Tallahassee, Florida. We are not only seeking monetary donations but are asking able bodied people to donate some time and sweat equity in the construction of this boat towards making this dream a reality.

If you would like to see the artist renditions of our new vessel and see photos of various warriors and their families enjoying a cruise with Freedom Excursions, please view it at www.freedomexcursions.org. Feel free to telephone me at (813) 641-3096 or (813) 299-8976. To make a donation for "Warrior's Angel," you can go to the fundraising website: www.firstgiving.com/freedomexcursions

Thank you for taking the time to become familiar with our program. "Therapy through recreation" is not our motto but our goal. Our venue will enhance and improve the lives of those heroes, wounded or not, and families who know the stress of military life so that we may enjoy our freedom. ●

We're proud to serve those who serve our communities.

For more information on our Florida PBA-endorsed* retirement programs, please call Richard Snyder at 888-442-4230 or Bill Smith at 860-843-3932.

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