

FUNDRAISING FRONT LINE



Gulf Coast beach bar goes all-in
to support military causes

By Kit Bernardi

In times of conflict, our nation's service members put their lives on the line. Flora-Bama, an iconic Gulf Coast roadhouse that has straddled the Alabama and Florida border for more than 50 years, works tirelessly to ensure that their

service is always remembered.

"Our love for military personnel and their families continues Flora-Bama's historic legacy of actively supporting the local communities and military on both sides of the state line," says Cameron Price, a co-owner

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and a West Point- and MIT-educated former infantry platoon leader. Each year, Flora-Bama hosts more than 25 events that typically raise more than \$100,000 for military support groups as well as local organizations.

Given its proximity to several military bases and the region's large veteran population, Flora-Bama's connection to the military might seem natural, but it has evolved over time.

Flora-Bama started as a beachfront bar and package store, opening in 1964 on the new state line, which had shifted as the result of a land swap that facilitated the construction of the Perdido Pass Bridge. Joe Gilchrist purchased Flora-Bama in 1978. Pat McClellan, a former Naval public affairs and special services officer, came aboard in 1984, and together they put Flora-Bama on the map as a renowned live music venue and event center.

In 2010, Price and his friend and business partner John McInnis, both with extensive experience in the construction industry, joined the ownership team. Today Flora-Bama includes two restaurants, as well as a liquor store, marina and yacht club.

Flora-Bama made history of sorts this year when it became the host of the first base in U.S. Army Ranger Association history to bear the name of a living ranger, Congressional Gold Medal recipient Gabriel Kinney, age 100. A resident of Daphne, Ala., Kinney is the oldest of six known surviving members of the famed World War II Merrill's Marauders, who marched through 1,000 miles of jungle in Myanmar (then Burma) to capture an enemy-held airfield. Kinney is also honored in the U.S. Army Ranger Hall of Fame at Fort Benning, Ga.

The first meeting at Flora-Bama was in February, and monthly meetings draw an average of approximately 40 rangers. "Because Flora-Bama is a legendary gathering place for active and veteran military, and the Army Rangers' accomplishments are legendary, our partnership is a natural fit that supports and honors rangers in our region," says base commander Chris Rivers.

Flora-Bama is also the unofficial home of Operation ReConnect. Founded in 2015 by Air Force Staff Sgt. Ryan Charrier, the nonprofit organization provides free weeklong family vacations on Alabama's Gulf Coast to post-9/11 combat veterans. Homeowners and rental management companies in coastal Alabama and northwest Florida



Flora-Bama's America's Warriors Beach Run/Walk benefits the Special Operations Warrior Foundation.

beach communities donate use of their properties. Other local businesses contribute food, gift cards, beach gear, boat rides and more to create a complete vacation experience. Since its founding, Operation ReConnect has hosted more than 300 military families.



GIVING BACK

Of all the events the entertainment complex hosts or supports, none is more unique than the annual Interstate Mullet Toss & Beach Party, where participants compete to fling mullet fish the farthest. Flora-Bama donates proceeds to various regional causes, including local Veterans of Foreign Wars posts and the National Chief Petty Officers Association at Naval Air Station Pensacola Corry Station.

Doc Wallach, a former Navy special intelligence and reconnaissance operator, produces and acts as master of ceremonies for the event which, before the COVID-19 pandemic, attracted as many as 30,000 people. Attendees pay \$15 to hurl a fish across the state line. The winner gets a T-shirt, and all tossed fish are donated to the Alabama Gulf Coast Zoo to feed the animals.

Flora-Bama's Beach Run-Walk for America's Warriors each March raises funds for the Special Operations Warrior Foundation, which provides grief counseling, college scholarships and educational and career counseling to

— Paula Boyer-McNulty, widow of Delta Force Master Sgt. Mike McNulty



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children of Navy, Army, Air Force and Marine Corps special operations personnel killed in the line of duty.

The bar's first Warrior Foundation fundraiser in 2014 honored Mike Tarlavsky, an Army Special Forces captain and team leader based in Fort Campbell, Ky. Tarlavsky and Flora-Bama's Price were both infantry platoon leaders at Schofield Barracks in Hawaii. Later, Price was a groomsman when Tarlavsky married Capt. Tricia Fernandez, an Army veteran who served six years in the Medical Service Corps Branch. In 2004, Tarlavsky was killed during a mission in Najaf, Iraq, when the couple's son, Joey, was 10 months old.

"The most important thing for us is to know that Mike will always be remembered, and Special Operations Warrior Foundation and Flora-Bama work to ensure that," Fernandez says. "Our son is now a freshman in college, and they are still supporting us like they did when I was holding a baby in my arms and learned of our hero's death."

Paula Boyer-McNulty is also grateful to Flora-Bama. She and Delta Force Master Sgt. Mike McNulty were high school sweethearts who married after McNulty finished basic training at age 18. They had four teenage children when McNulty was killed in 2005 on his fifth deployment in Iraq.

Price and McNulty served together in Hawaii, and they both represented the 25th Infantry Division in the 2001 Best Ranger Competition at Fort Benning. Flora-Bama honored McNulty during its 2017 America's Warriors fundraiser.

"Every day, Flora-Bama makes

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— Cameron Price, Flora-Bama co-owner



Cameron Price and family



Delta Force Master Sgt. Mike McNulty

CHICKEN WING AND A PRAYER

In addition to the liquid variety, Flora-Bama has also been serving the Holy Spirit for a decade of Sundays. Pre-pandemic, Sunday services at Central Church Flora-Bama were typically packed, and special Christmas and Easter celebrations on the beach have drawn 10,000 worshippers.



Maj. Jeremy Mount, the church's first pastor who is now 1st Special Forces group chaplain at Joint Base Lewis-McChord in Washington state, attributes the nondenominational Christian church's popularity to Flora-Bama's relaxed setting and immediate, welcoming reception of all who walk in the door. He says that it's a winning combination, attracting active military personnel in the area who may not feel comfortable in a traditional church.

"Although unusual, the casual bar space model works beautifully for church services because it, like the Christian mandate, embraces all aspects of humanity," Mount says. "Flora-Bama's characteristic nonjudgmental, come-as-you-are, let's-do-life-together spirit makes its church what many churches with overhead operational cost concerns strive to be."

— Kit Bernardi



Flora-Bama hosts an annual Deep Dive fundraiser and Deep Dive Memorial 5K beach run in support of the Combat Diver Foundation. Country star John Rich performed at a concert to benefit Folds of Honor.

sure that our country's heroes are never forgotten and everyone is always welcomed," Boyer-McNulty says. "Flora-Bama fills a lot of voids in people's lives."

In 2019, Flora-Bama aligned with the Combat Diver Foundation to host the organization's inaugural Deep Dive fundraiser. The ultimate goal is to build the Combat Diver Museum and establish a global community of active and veteran combat divers. The organization's president, Lino Miani, reached out to fellow former combat diver Price to help realize

these goals. "Our mandate is to preserve the history of the Combat Diver community as a whole," Miani says. "That includes graduates of the Special Forces Underwater Operations School in Key West, Fla., as well as those across all services and nations that are highly trained in the art of traveling underwater to engage the enemy. We want to recognize this elite community because its history is global in scope."

Attendance at the Flora-Bama Deep Dive fundraising events has grown from 16 in 2019 to 350 in 2021,

and hundreds more participated in the virtual event. This year, the Deep Dive Memorial 5K beach run honored fallen Green Beret John M. Wirka Jr.

Plans for Deep Dive 2022 include a combat diver reunion, a family and networking event, a motorcycle charity ride and a joint tactical demonstration showcasing combat diver capabilities across all branches of the military.

In March, Flora-Bama added yet another military organization to its fundraising efforts. A concert starring country music singer and

songwriter John Rich of the duo Big & Rich was held in support of Folds of Honor, a group that provides educational scholarships to spouses and children of killed and disabled U.S. soldiers.

"The ultimate way to say 'thank you for your service' is to look after military families," Rich says. "Because Flora-Bama and I share that feeling, Flora-Bama is family to me. For seven years I've taken my wife and kids to Alabama's Gulf Coast to have fun at Flora-Bama and support our country's military."

CONTENTS

2021 SPECIAL EDITION
VETERANS AFFAIRS



C-SHELZ PHOTOGRAPHY

74

FUN AND FUNDRAISING
Flora-Bama beach bar serves up support for veterans

FEATURES

68 UNIFORM APPROACH
Former soldiers, athletes work together on next moves

82 CULTIVATING CAREERS
Group helps future farmers and ranchers



KELBY KOSEL

UP FRONT

10 COMMITMENT CONTINUES
Q&A with VA Secretary Denis McDonough

16 PANDEMIC RELIEF
Mortgage programs to assist veterans

20 LONG ROAD BACK
Deported veteran becomes U.S. citizen

24 SWEET SHELTER
Veterans homes built and restored

28 RESPECTFUL REFLECTION
USS Franklin attack survivors reunite

32 GREAT GETAWAY
Higgins Hotel salutes World War II

36 BLAZING A PATH
Veteran, author teaches history of Black soldiers

40 JOYFUL REUNION
WWII vet reconnects with Italian family

44 PATRIOTIC PIONEER
Remembering Gen. Colin Powell