

Camp Happy Sands, a Brief History

In the early 1960's, Mrs. Corrine Jones was walking in the area on the Soundside of Johnson's Beach at Perdido Key and was struck with the beauty of the land and surrounding intercoastal waters. She thought this beautiful place could serve as a wonderful site for a summer camp for children of low income families. She spent a year soliciting funds and was eventually able to purchase the land which she donated to her church, St. Cyprian's Episcopal Church. The land was then turned over to the Episcopal Diocese of Florida in 1966.

At that time, Mrs. Jones and Mrs. Ila Roose worked for the City Recreation Department. They both worked with developing programs for area playgrounds and youth centers and met weekly to do their planning. Since they both were involved in the Episcopal Church they often attended meetings for the Women of the Church and took the opportunity to ask the Bishop of the Episcopal Diocese of Florida if he would provide financial support in starting the camp. He agreed to donate funds toward making the camp a reality. The Rev. Arnold Bush, then Rector of St. Frances Episcopal Church in Gulf Breeze, agreed to direct the camp. Several organizational planning meetings were held. As Mrs. Roose describes, she had the pleasure of providing the name for the camp - 'Happy Sands' at their third meeting. Her idea came from the fact that "there was an awful lot of Sand out there and we wanted the children to have a Happy experience"!

They both agreed to teach craft at the first summer camp session in 1967 working with Reverend Bush. At that time camp was conducted during an eight-day session and 65 children participated in the program. First Presbyterian Church provided their bus to transport the children. Trinity Presbyterian also joined in providing support to the camp.

The second Director was Father Bill Merritt from St. Anthony's Catholic Church. His involvement resulted in gaining sponsorship support from additional catholic churches in the area. After his departure, Mr. Al Norris, a Recreation Leader for the Methodist

church, served as Director. Local Methodist churches joined in the ecumenical effort and also provided a bus for transportation. In 1970, the camp land was turned over to the new Episcopal Diocese of the Central Gulf Coast. Mrs. Roose began directing the camp in 1973. At that time they were able to extend camp to a four week session, with 30 campers a week in attendance. In two years they added a fifth and then a sixth week session to the length of the camp. Our ecumenical family had grown and we were proud and grateful to welcome the assistance and support of area Lutheran, Baptist, and Greek Orthodox churches. The camp's look was also changing and growing. Mr. W. S. Waller and other men from St. Cyprian's Episcopal Church built the much needed camp pavilion and storage building.

In 1978 the camp land became part of the National Seashore. The Right Rev. William Murray and the Episcopal Diocese worked with the National Seashore to form an agreement which would enable the staff to continue use of the camp site as long as it was used to provide camp for low income children.

Corrine Jones continued to help with the camp with Ila Roose through the years until she became too frail and ill, eventually dying in a nursing home in 1991.

After the camp survived three major hurricanes in the 90's, Mrs. Roose continued as director until her health began to fail, eventually retiring from Happy Sands in 2002.

At this time her son Charlie Roose and daughter in-law Brenda agreed to manage the Happy Sands Incorporation. An executive board of six members was formed.

In September 2004, Hurricane Ivan completely destroyed the camp facilities, which included: the pavilion, storage building, beach pavilion, boardwalks, the entry road, and most of the surrounding vegetation. After 38 years of operation, the sounds of children playing at Happy Sands were silenced during the summer of 2005. During this time, the executive director and his board were challenged with a decision to try and rebuild the camp, or close the camp for good. With much discussion and much prayer we decided

to “go for it” and raise the funds to rebuild the entire camp mainly for the sake of the children. For over year we worked extremely hard to raise the funds to rebuild the camp. With a lot of prayer and financial support from sponsors and the National Episcopal Church, rebuild efforts came to fruition. With contractors that Charlie Roose managed to hire to build new construction, agreements were made to allow volunteer teams to assist in order to save money. The Happy Sands new facilities were completed in the spring of 2006, just in time to re-open for the summer session.

In the summer of 2007, the Board of Directors and staff reached a long time goal in meeting the needs of over 180 children.