

Crowds love Island Wedding Fest

Anna Maria Island Sun News Story

By Tom Vaught | Sun staff writer

HOLMES BEACH – The volunteers taking money to register brides, grooms and their families for the Third Annual Anna Maria Island Chamber of Commerce Wedding Festival last Sunday knew they were on a roll.

Some 550 registrations had been made in advance, more than all of last year's event, and they knew that they were breaking the record.

When the applications were counted, 332 more people had signed up making the total 832, a record for this young event. Not bad considering the cold and wet weather the day before.

The Chamber parking lot was full of people going from vendor to vendor. One of the two large tents housed some of the 80 vendors who signed up offering all sorts of services. Kerri Alderson, from the Manatee County Convention and Visitors Center, was showing the advantages of a wedding at the Powell Crosley Museum to Bonnie Kirstein and Chuck Lambert. They had driven from their home in Tampa to see what Anna Maria Island and Manatee County has to offer.

"We drove two hours for this," Kirstein said.

Joe Yeckley and Kristen Sullivan came in from St. Petersburg. They got engaged last December.

"We plan on getting married in May 2011," Yeckley said. "We're shopping around today."

Asked if they were considering a beach wedding, they both agreed they would love to have one.

The first big event was the fashion show in the other large tent. Model after model walked the runway showing various styles. Some were for brides, some were for grooms and there were styles for moms as well. Toward the end, bride and groom models came out together and then they all came out to the roars of applause from the audience.

One lady approached Amy Welch, the owner of Aqua Aveda Salon, which put on the show, and bought one of the dresses that her daughter modeled. It was delivered to her Monday.

After that, the attendees headed to the west side of the parking lot to board the chartered trolleys and limousines that were waiting to whisk them to other stops on the Island. Those stops included the BeachHouse, which had hosted a brunch for the attendees earlier, the Tortuga Inn, where the floating chapel was docked, the Island Sun Plaza and the Sandbar, where the mock wedding would be held to end the day.

At the Sun Plaza, Goldie Rohlfe and David Garza, from Tampa, were talking with the vendors. They found out about Anna Maria Island from a relative, Candy Shields, a former Anna Maria Elementary School secretary who lives here. They were hoping to have a beach wedding.

"We loved the view of the Gulfside," Goldie said. "We would definitely get married here."

A lot of vendors were located inside the Anna Maria Island Community Center. The Center also housed the Grooms' Zone with things for the men to do while their brides-to-be looked at flowers, plates and dresses. Outside the Center, the Pittsburgh Pirates had a pitching cage setup.

Dan Darren, of Punta Gorda, pitched a few balls and then talked about his upcoming wedding. "We're getting married next year," he said. "We're looking at a lot of places and this Island has the best."

Tiffany Blevins and her fiancé, Tyler Branscombe, threw some pitches. They were there with Tiffany's mother,



Melinda. They live in Bradenton and know about the Island and will be getting married on the beach.

Inside the Grooms' Zone, the men were preparing to watch the men's hockey game between the US and Canada. There was a putting green supplied by the Fish Hole mini-golf course, of Bradenton Beach, and a beanbag pitching game. In one corner, Ryan Dennis, of YoLo Parasail, and charter fishing Capt. Scott Green were talking with prospective customers.

Simply gourmet served food to the attendees inside the Community Center gym. One of those in line was Travis Hurley, of New Port Richey, who said he came to the festival because his brother got married on Anna Maria Island last year and recommended it. Hurley plans on getting married July 10.

The day ended at the Sandbar where two sets of brides and grooms said "I do" in a mock ceremony, giving all who were there an idea of what it's all about – a ceremony of a lifetime in a naturally beautiful setting.

The Chamber will turn this event into a two-day Island showcase next year, but intends to hold it in an off-season month to help area resorts and hotels accommodate weekend stays and to infuse much needed off-season income into businesses' bottom lines during slow months, festival organizer and Chiles Group Marketing Director Caryn Hodge said. She was elated with this year's results.

"The positive economic impact is limitless and will be a great source of revenue for area businesses for years to come," she said. "Couples may only get married once, or maybe twice, but they come back for their anniversaries, vacations and to bring their families."

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