

We came; we celebrated; we must continue the journey

The memory of one very special day at Laishley Park on August 15, two weeks ago, is still vivid. Punta Gorda's Five-Year Xtreme Makeover Celebration was one of the most well-attended festivals in the park's history. Thank you to all who sponsored, volunteered, participated, and made this day so special. Attendees came from all over Charlotte County, Southwest Florida from Sarasota to Naples, and beyond.

Not only was the Xtreme Makeover a milestone for our achievement and but also an opportunity to thank those who helped us along the way. People lined up waiting for the guided trolley tours that showed off 68 different construction and revitalization projects completed in Punta Gorda in the last five years. Tour participants were amazed at not only what was available in Laishley Park but with the transformation of Punta Gorda. Some Punta residents even learned new things about their own hometown.

More than four years ago, when TEAM Punta Gorda visited Delray Beach, Fla., their Downtown Development Authority executive director told us to "wait until you're ready to invite people into the community. The worst thing would be to invite people in when you're still in recovery mode." It was difficult to hear those words back then. The Xtreme Makeover Celebration was a "coming-out party!" We were ready to show off what we've done and let the world know our story.

Hurricane recovery was the catalyst that has become a story of transformation and societal change. It is a chronicle of how people from all over Charlotte County worked together to make a difference. Punta Gorda has blossomed into a destination for people to gather. Where they would previously look to Sarasota or Fort Myers for entertainment, people are spending discretionary dollars right here in Charlotte County.

Yet we are being called to continue this journey. As much as has been accomplished in five years throughout Charlotte County there is so

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much more to do. We have demonstrated that the citizens can effectively work in partnership with governmental partners to set direction, volunteer time and talent, and inspire the greater community to achieve a quality of life never before thought possible. What is happening in Punta Gorda is having a ripple effect throughout Charlotte County.

Just imagine:

- The diversity of our community growing with new employers bringing career opportunities and additional higher education offerings.

- Vacant commercial lots infilling with new businesses as we are discovered as a most desirable place to live,

work, and play.

- The interconnecting of multi-use recreational trails continuing throughout Punta Gorda and Charlotte County.

- The continuing transformation of the Punta Gorda Harborwalk, Charlotte Harbor's waterfront, and other water's edge locales.

- Additional venues emerging to fulfill a demand for research, harbor ecology, historic preservation, and the arts.

- The collaboration of City, County, citizens, and other organizations continuing to be a key to success and remaining a model to other communities across the nation.

It's not too late to get

involved in the continuing transformation. Not only is it fun, it's very rewarding! It's a chance to meet many interesting people and make new friends. TEAM Punta Gorda members reside all over Charlotte County and enjoy volunteering on a variety of committees. You'll find a lot of information about TEAM at www.teampuntagorda.org. If you have questions you can contact us at team@teampuntagorda.org or 941-637-TEAM.

Please remember to shop and dine locally. Our business community deserves our support.