

## DAILY SUN

**ONLY IN  
THE VILLAGES**

*By J.T. Wilcox*

**Dragon boating's origin traces back more than 2,000 years to ancient China. The exercise of paddling large boats with dragon features carved into them was seen as a way to "ward off evil and seek good fortune."**

When Donnie Lies came up with the idea of creating a new dragon boat club, a part of his vision was to do something similar for kids in Sumter County.

"Everybody talks about stuff when they're sitting in a restaurant or at home — 'We should do this and



The Junior Dragoneers dragon boat team, comprised of Wildwood Middle High School students and local volunteers, practice their paddling techniques as they leave the boat ramp and paddle onto Lake Deaton on Tuesday.

*George Horsford,  
Daily Sun*

this' — but it never happens because they only envision the finish line but never the starting line," Lies said. "When this started, we got our business plan in order and started going about the steps of creating the Sumter County Dragon Boat Club. And we wanted to reach kids in Sumter County ... through dragon boating because it promotes all the good things that you get from most sports, but it doesn't just do it for the super athletic kids, it does it for all the kids."

"And as Wildwood's principal, Mr. Rodney Rocker Jr., said, 'If you help even one child, change the life of one child, you've done something great,'" Lies added.

Lies, a Village of Poinciana resident, shared his plan with six other Villagers — Dottie Baker, Debbie Perricelli, Lou and Janet Mintzer, Gail Rush and Ron Schultz — that he'd known from being a part of the

Grand Masters Dragon Boat Club, and the "magnificent seven" founded the new Sumter County Dragon Boat Club.

"I was 100 percent in from day one," said Mintzer, who lives in the Village of Hawkins and serves as team coach. "My wife and I love giving back, and we love sports. Sports have kept me healthy my whole life. It taught me about being a part of a team and to never to give up and keep plodding along."

"We're also very fortunate to have retired, to be healthy and now introduce a new opportunity to these great kids," Mintzer said.

**T**hrough the club, Lies not only wanted to create a team for the kids at the two schools — The Junior Dragoneers — but provide them with instruction, free dragon boat gear, food on practice and

race days and mentorship.

"You can give a person \$10 so they can buy a meal. That's great. But imagine then spending time with that person while they ate the meal or maybe cooking the meal for them instead of just giving them the money for it," Lies said. "Giving of yourself in other ways besides financial has a greater impact."

With everything in place, including boats, paddles and other equipment, they just needed students.

A few boxes of pizza and bottles of soda got kids in the door, but it was Lies and the Villagers' presentation of dragon boating that got them to the water.

Nearly 20 students from each school, from various grade levels, joined last month and began attending practices one day a week after school — Wildwood on Tuesdays and South Sumter on Thursdays — either on campus or at Lake Deaton Park.

"The big thing is exposure. Some of the kids didn't even know that the lake was here or have never been to a lake or been in a body of water before. They definitely didn't know anything about dragon boating," Mintzer said with a chuckle. "But they've been embracing it — the classroom teaching them the basics to actually getting them out on the water."

**B**ecause of inclement weather, this past Tuesday was the first time Wildwood's paddlers could take the boat into the main part of the lake.

"The students are very into it," said Lindsey Skaggs, a science teacher at Wildwood Middle High School who serves as one of the team liaisons. "I have one kid that is

watching YouTube videos on dragon boating and practicing at home...They are learning to work as a team, they're learning to get along together, how to help out, and they're doing things that they don't get to do at school out here."

Also watching the kids paddle this past week was Joe Elliott, City Commissioner (Seat 3) for Wildwood.

"The people you saw here today are the leaders of our country tomorrow. And

using dragon boating to bring them together and create a more cohesive environment is absolutely fantastic," said Elliott, who lives in the Village of Buttonwood. "I have all the respect in the world for Don and the group he's put together with the club."

The club donated money to the Wildwood Soup Kitchen, which provides post-practice snacks on Tuesdays and Thursdays, will unveil racing jerseys in the coming weeks and is practicing for its first competitive regatta on May 22-23 at Leesburg's Ski Beach.

"I love it. It's something new, something different, something fun and I get to hang out with my buddies, have some good food, get on the water, see wildlife and race," a freshman paddler from Wildwood said. "I can't run fast, but I can be a dragon boater."

To learn more about the Sumter County Dragon Boat Club, visit [www.weracedragonboats.com](http://www.weracedragonboats.com).

*Managing editor J.T. Wilcox can be reached at 352-753-1119, ext. 5332 or [jt.wilcox@thevillagesmedia.com](mailto:jt.wilcox@thevillagesmedia.com).*