

The Tale of The Pearl



By Shelly Foy

Back in 1994, the directors of the Treasure Coast GCSA often met after work to grab a bite, share a cold one, and talk about association business. That year the guys were stirred up because Paul Harvey had just finished a broadcast that was not very flattering to golf courses.

Tim Cann, president at the time, had previously been involved with the Suncoast Scramble and remembered how much fun they had planning and hosting the tournament. He suggested the TCGCSA host a similar fundraising event. Collectively, the TCGCSA board — Cann, Craig Weyandt, Dick Gray, Bill Lanthier, David Chees-

man, Roger Welker, David Oliver, Jack Orr, Steve Sill, Chris Leahy, Brad Fick, and Tom Benefield — decided it was time for golf course superintendents to get serious about letting people know the truth about golf and the environment. In Gray's words, they needed some "green ink." They proposed a golf tournament to raise funds for teaching environmental awareness and showing that golf courses are good for the environment.

The first event, dubbed the "First Annual Wildlife Charity Golf Tournament," was held at Loblolly Pines GC in Hobe Sound May 21, 1994. The flyer read, "So often our industry is criticized for its perceived negative impact on the environment. This is an excellent opportunity for us to make a positive impact."

The first tournament raised more than \$10,000 for the Treasure Coast Wildlife Hospital.

Needing a catchier name, Gray proposed "Blue Pearl," remembering a NASA photo where the Earth looked like a pearl in a sea of blue. So in 1995, the Blue Pearl was born.

In its 16-year history, the Blue Pearl has raised more than a quarter-million dollars. The goal was, "By funding environmental and ecological awareness programs in grade schools throughout the Treasure Coast, we can inform and educate not only students, but teachers, administrators, and parents. We can foster and nurture an age of children who grow up knowing the benefits of a healthy environment and the benefits golf courses offer to people, wildlife,

Roy MacDonald and Tim Cann present Debbie Fritz-Quincy, director, Hobe Sound Nature Center, with a check for \$12,500 to support newly opened educational exhibits. Photo by Shelly Foy. Earth – The Blue Pearl. Logo courtesy of the TCGCSA.

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and the environment.”

Below is a partial list of environmental programs and projects the Blue Pearl has supported over the years:

- \$20,000 to help Pelican Island Elementary School in Vero Beach purchase adjacent lots to protect as Scrub Jay habitat
- \$8,500 to sponsor four years of the Indian River Lagoon Envirothon
- Over \$34,000 since 1996 for the South Fork High School turf program. South Fork High School has a three-hole golf course on campus. Students are encouraged to work hard to earn acceptance into the golf program. Several South Fork students have graduated from the turf program and are now working in the golf industry.
- Over \$5,000 to Audubon International as grant money for schools across the country looking for funding for environmental projects

Many individual schools have received grants for environmental programs, including:

- Hobe Sound Elementary School built a native plant nursery/slat house, designed and installed butterfly and hummingbird gardens, provided school-wide subscriptions for National Geographic magazine, and purchased environmentally themed books for the school library.
- Hidden Oaks Elementary constructed an outdoor classroom
- Crystal Lake Elementary built a nature trail
- Palm City Elementary purchased 30 sets of computer programs on oceans and rainforests, and created a land-

scape habitat area

- Sea Wind Elementary School created a butterfly garden
- Stuart Middle School installed a butterfly garden and purchased a dolphin topiary
- Citrus Elementary School planted vegetable gardens and a developed a Tree Program
- Martin County School District Plant Nursery purchased native plant liners to encourage use of native plants on school grounds

In July, the TCGCSA donated \$12,500 to the Hobe Sound Nature Center which lost its building to hurricanes in 2004, and in August, new exhibits were opened to the public to promote environmental awareness for people of all ages. In addition to on- and off-site environmental programs that reach more than 60,000 students a year, there are many programs for the public, including turtle walks, summer camps, evening forums, scrub habitat tours, and more.

Originally intended solely for environmental awareness, the Blue Pearl has diversified recently due to the increasing need for financial support for disaster relief. Donations have included money for 9/11 victims, support for superintendents affected by Hurricane Katrina, as well as other benevolent funding needs. They also came to the aid of the Challenger School in Stuart with a \$5,000 donation to help build a handicapped-accessible playground.

I have been fortunate to have been involved with the Blue Pearl, almost from its beginning. I have seen first-hand how generous the TCGCSA and the Blue Pearl

sponsors have been over the years. Craig Weyandt, superintendent at the Moorings Country Club in Vero Beach recently said, “I can still hear the passion in Dick’s voice when we came up with the concept for the Blue Pearl. He said that it was up to each of us to polish the pearl, take care of it. After all, we are only tenants here, visitors, guests. It is not ours to abuse.”

Since the Blue Pearl’s beginning, there have been eight presidents of the TC-GCSA and each one has taken on the responsibility of “polishing the pearl”.

Cann, now in his second term as president, said, “Even though boards have changed over the last 16 years, the original message of the Blue Pearl has stayed alive. This year’s contribution to the Hobe Sound Nature Center is a perfect example of what the Blue Pearl fundraising is intended for. We are especially thankful to every participant, vendor, and volunteer that continues to be generous year after year even in these tough financial times.”

Recently Gray reminded me that the original goal was to have a String of Pearls across the country. “Can you imagine what we could do as an industry if every state hosted a Blue Pearl and the collective money raised went to fund environmental awareness and to also tell all the ways golf courses benefit the community and the environment? Man, wouldn’t that be sweet?”

A String of Pearls across the country is doable. Florida could challenge other states if every chapter would host a Blue Pearl in 2011, or at least support a statewide Blue Pearl fund. Eleven FGCSA Chapters, eleven pearls on the string. Who’s up for a challenge?

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