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German-American Social Club celebrates its 60th anniversary

Herzlichen Glückwunsch!

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A city social club celebrated a major milestone this year, marking its diamond jubilee anniversary.

The German-American Social Club of Cape Coral marked 60 years, holding a celebration recently where memories were shared, and history discussed.

Best known for its major Oktoberfest celebrations, the GASC has been a staple in the Southwest Florida community, making an impact on local business, building strong bonds, and sharing culture with its members.

A large contingent came out to celebrate the occasion, as music rang throughout the GASC hall. The president of the United German Society was in attendance and presented the club with a plaque to signify six decades of existence.

In 1964, local restaurant owner Willy Gruetzenbach worked hard to bring Cape Coral's German Americans together to honor their heritage and socialize among friends. The club started with 34 original members meeting at the Cape Coral Yacht Club, hosting dances and events to raise money for the club.

In 1985, the club opened its gates for the first Cape Coral Oktoberfest, which has grown to be one of the largest events throughout the state annually, seeing tens of thousands of attendees. The club brings in authentic bands from Germany, sets up a big tent, and goes through countless kegs of German beer. You can't forget about the traditional German food served, as the GASC kitchen is bustling over the two-weekend event.

"It's our opportunity to throw one of the biggest parties in Lee County, and invite people on the property to enjoy themselves," said GASC President Erich Kohl. "People can come see our grounds, our facilities, and get a taste of German culture both food and music wise. We are also inclusive with the different groups that come out, such as Celtic dancers and Lee County Pipes & Drums. We have something for everybody."

In 1969, the Club's official banner depicting the insignia of its traditional main events — the "Munchner Kindl" and the ornate "Karneval Hats" was designed by Jack Fitzmaurice and handmade by Lucia Uhde and it is now proudly displayed on the stage of the "von Steuben Hall." In 1970, when the membership had grown to 300, acreage was purchased on Pine Island Road. Through the hard work of many of the members, a road was built into this property and ground was cleared for a picnic area. The dedicated members were elated when the grounds were finally completed and the property was ready to be put to use.

In 1971 "Waltzing Waters", operated by a club mentor, Gunther Przystawik, was moved from its former location in the Rose Gardens to the German-American Club property. This was Cape Coral's first tourist attraction and remained so until April 1982, when due to circumstances beyond the club's control, it was moved to another location.

In the early '80s, the club's attractive picnic grounds were improved and enlarged by the diligent efforts of its Beautification Committee Members. These dedicated members constructed additional concrete tables and benches to accommodate the increasingly larger crowds that are drawn to the popular Bavarian Gartenfests which offer food, beer and a very enjoyable time with good American and German live music.

Through the years, the German American Social Club has remained a successful staple in Cape Coral, offering various festivals and events throughout the year to an eager Southwest Florida crowd.

At its height, the club had 1,300 members in 1986, with roughly 600 members currently on board today.

The GASC has proudly given back a portion of profits from its events to the community, annually donating around \$30,000 to area clubs and non-profit organizations, thus hundreds of thousands of dollars given to worthy causes over the past 60 years.

Despite the changing of the times, especially with how much Cape Coral has grown and developed over time, the GASC has stayed resilient in its mission. Being in Southwest Florida, you can't dismiss damage from storms the club has also recovered from, most notably Hurricane Ian in 2022.

"Like everything, we have our ups and downs, and some losses people-wise who were very important to the club," Kohl said. "We try to remember all of their efforts in bringing us where we are today. We try to be resilient. With Hurricane Ian, we were out three or four months, picked up the pieces, and power through. Even COVID had us shut down for a while. It's just like life; there are ups and downs. You get back up and keep going."

Each of the club's achievements is built on the tireless efforts of its committed members who, over the years, have pitched in funds, countless hours of hard work, and their hearts, to make it what it stands for today.

GASC over the years has provided funding as assistance for organizations such as Hope Hospice, the Cape Coral Explorers, and local food pantries.

As for what the future holds, Kohl said he hopes to see the club's formula continue to do what it does best.

"The most important thing is to maintain what we're doing," Kohl said. "We critique ourselves. We try to work on ourselves and fix things. The biggest thing is just to stay around for another 60 years, and make our members and former members and family proud of us and what we're doing. We try to maintain what they started."

You don't have to be German to join, just have the willingness to meet new people and create bonds.

“We try to make everybody feel welcome and want them to enjoy themselves,” Kohl said. “There’s not a lot of organizations like ours left. We try to be one big happy family.”

Kohl has been an official member of the club going on 15 years, and grew up around it, as his father, Klaus, was a former president as he was growing up.

Kohl said Cape Coral has been a great place for the club to settle and build roots.

“It’s been a great foundation,” he said. “I think our forefathers would be surprised with how quickly from what they thought Cape Coral was going to be; a little sleepy retirement town, to all the hustle and bustle and building going on all over the city. The expansion has been incredible to see.”

Kohl also wanted to share a “thank you” to the community on behalf of the club.

“We really appreciate the community coming out and supporting us in everything we do,” he said. “From Oktoberfest, to our Gartenfests, when we have our Saturday dance events. It’s just great to have people come in and enjoy our facility. We plan on hanging around.”

The club is open every Friday night for a casual dinner and dance for members and non-members.

The German-American Social Club of Cape Coral is at 2101 Southwest Pine Island Road.

For more information, including membership and upcoming events, visit www.gasc-capecoral.com.

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