

Sweet smell of success

Rotary's longtime connection to Chief Joseph Days aids many

By JEFF BUDLONG
Wallowa County Chieftain

JOSEPH — The sweet smell of fried onions is set to fill the air around Chief Joseph Days once again.

For more than 25 years, the Rotary Club of Wallowa County has been a fixture at Chief Joseph Days selling food as its primary fundraiser for the year. The cheeseburgers, hot dogs and drinks are popular enough that the club grew from a cramped trailer to a more permanent structure where the grill and wok are able to satisfy the happy customers.

"We run the Bronc Buster Grill out of that space, and it is the only time of the year it is open," club President-elect Jeff Fields said. "Our big draw is that we grill up a bunch of Walla Walla sweet onions and that aroma floats across the rodeo grounds. It is our biggest advertisement."

Seven Rotary members work shifts throughout the four days of the event with Fields often manning the grill with another person at the two-foot wok tending to the onions. Two people take orders at a time, someone preps the food, a floater helps where needed and a cashier collects money.

It comes across as a well-oiled machine, but planning begins in April to get the wheels in motion, and food vendors are lined up in May. All of the food comes from local vendors. Fields said the club will grill about 100 pounds of onions and about 1,000 hamburger patties weighing in at one-third pound each.

Each day the grill is



Contributed Photo

The current Bronc Buster Grill that the Rotary Club of Wallowa County operates during Chief Joseph Days.

restocked and the process starts all over again. The long days lead to tired bodies, but Fields said it is all worth it in the end.

Rotary members work in shifts across the days and are often greeted by the smiles of returning customers throughout the years. It allows the club to showcase itself to people that come far and wide to Chief Joseph Days. "It is a great community partnership and a great way to showcase the service reason behind Rotary," Fields said. "The motto of Rotary is a life of service."

Fields said it also allows rotaractors — those 18 through their 20s — and interactors — high school rotary clubs — to see their club in action and build connections with other members.

"I think it is important for people of all ages to have examples," Field said. "To have people and those in their 20s ... is a great example of when people work together so much more can get done."

Lasting impact

Although there are just four nights of rodeo at Chief Joseph Days, the proceeds that are raised help sustain the club's general fund throughout the year. The club focuses on education, health and the local environment.

"We do short- and long-term high school student exchange, there is a youth leader conference we send a person to and job shadowing for high school students," Fields said. "We also support seven female students in El Salvador."

The club also aids a drinking water project in Baja, Mexico, helps the local food bank and several other projects out of its general fund.

Fields said being able to help others gets back to the core of the Rotary Club of Wallowa County.

"It is a group that is really animated by this idea of a life of service, and they are putting it into practice," he said. "It is just people who want to get things done and have a good time doing it."



Ellen Bishop/Contributed Photo

The 2022 Chief Joseph Days Court is, from left, Princess Mia Salerno, Queen Maggie Zacharias and Princess Bailey Vernam. They will preside over the festivities July 27-31, 2022, in Joseph.

Chief Joseph Days court excited for chance to lead

By JEFF BUDLONG
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JOSEPH — Maggie Zacharias is carrying on a family tradition as queen of the Chief Joseph Days Rodeo, but it also has a bigger meaning for the 19-year-old from Joseph.

Zacharias saw her aunt crowned queen in 2000, her cousin followed in 2019 and her grandparents were involved with Chief Joseph Days for years.

Zacharias has experience as queen of a rodeo court, taking that honor for the Elgin Stampede in 2019. It was during this time she met Ty Hallgarth, who would make a big impression on her.

"Ty was a board member at Elgin and we went to Vegas in December of 2019, and the conversation we struck up on the plane was whether I was running for Chief Joseph Days," she said. "I told him 'yes' and he said he would be my biggest fan."

"Unfortunately, Ty passed away at the beginning of this year. I have dedicated my queen year and everything to Ty because he helped me get here."

Hallgarth was a major supporter of rodeo and worked to help others get the most out of their experiences.

For Zacharias, who was named queen in April, it is also a chance to support her hometown rodeo, even if it did have its challenges at times.

"On the other rodeo court, we only had to give one speech one time," she said. "For Chief Joseph Days we

had to give it four times. I never have had to try out in the snow, but I ran barrels in the snow and did our tryouts in the snow in April. It was a lot with it being senior year, and I wondered how I would get it all done."

Zacharias is joined on the court by Princesses Bailey Vernam of Enterprise and Mia Salerno of Joseph. All three were judged on their speeches, ticket sales and horseback riding.

Each enjoys time on their horses and are excited to be part of the events and celebrations of Chief Joseph Days.

"I am excited to do our rodeo and for it to be our time to push cows and do run-ins," Zacharias said.

She will be showcasing several horses during Chief Joseph Days. Cowboy is a 10-year-old gelding, Rudi is a 7-year-old gelding, Snickers is another gelding and Kaddi is a 9-year-old mare.

Vernam, 18, also has a history with the event. Her mother, Shannon, of Enterprise, was also a princess at Chief Joseph Days. Vernam will ride Domino, which stands more than 17 hands high during Chief Joseph Days.

Salerno, 18, trained her horse, Bugatti, named after the sports car for her passion for speed.

Salerno earned her first royalty honors at Chief Joseph Days and has been excited to attend different rodeos to meet people and strike up friendships. She has a passion for riding.

"I first sat on a horse when I was a couple of months

old and I started competing actively when I was 7," she said. "I have done rodeos, gaming shows and barrel racing."

Vernam is looking forward to riding in the parade and watching children come up and interact with her and Domino.

The trio is spending the summer on the rodeo circuit, starting with the Eastern Oregon Livestock Show in early June, and ending with the Pendleton Round Up in September. At each rodeo, they will ride in parades, participate in rodeo run-ins and meet other rodeo courts from around the region.

Zacharias, the daughter of Luke and Merilee Zacharias, is set to enter the workforce as a medical assistant at Winding Waters Medical Clinic in Enterprise. Vernam will attend the University of Idaho in the fall and major in pre-health professions with designs on becoming an orthodontist. Salerno, the daughter of Damian and Kristan Salerno, will enter a trade school to learn to weld.

After the pandemic canceled the 2020 Chief Joseph Days and life returns to more normal with each passing day, this year's event is important to the court.

"We can show people that we are back with rodeo," Zacharias said. "We still need to be cautious of COVID, but don't be afraid to come out and have a good time."

"It is so nice to be back to normal," Vernam said. "Being able to see people's faces and the smiles we bring to them is so amazing to me."

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