

OVERCOMING FEAR

PENNYWARS



The first group of consumers practice paddling on the canoe in the parking lot of the Ridge Area Arc one morning last week. DIEGO DE JESUS/STAFF

Heartland Peacemaker Paddle

Practice before Friday launch on Lake Jackson

BY DIEGO DE JESUS
 Staff Writer

About 20 consumers of the Ridge Area Arc had a unique opportunity last week to practice paddling on a canoe. This was to prepare those participating in the 2025 Heartland Peacemaker Paddle on Lake Jackson at 8:30 a.m. this Friday where they will launch from Veterans Beach Park and Boat Ramp.

Ridge Area Arc, The Mason G. Smoak Foundation and Removing the Barriers are in partnership for these events. On the day of the paddle on Lake Jackson, representatives from Youth Leadership Highlands will be accompanying the consumers on the canoes.

Bill Redmon, founder of Removing the Barriers, drove into the parking lot of the Arc facility with a 29-foot Langley voyager style canoe in tow. There will be three of these canoes at Friday's Heartland Peacemaker Paddle.

He shared to the crowd his expertise, having rowed thousands of miles around America's lakes.

"We will have other people with you to help," Redmon said to the crowd. "We will show you all the safety procedures."

The consumers were divided into groups then aided into life jackets before being guided onto the canoe. They were given oars to practice to



Bill Redmon, founder of Removing the Barriers, shows the consumers an oar or their "best friend" when it comes to paddling on the canoes. DIEGO DE JESUS/STAFF

the rhythm of "Row, Row, Row Your Boat" and were in high spirits.

"The partnership is to ensure that people with disabilities have experiences on the water," Ridge Area Arc CEO Kathleen Border said. "People like Cristian haven't had that experience because they need a lot of accommodation

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that isn't typically available, so this is such a huge opportunity."

She continued that there's a lot of fear in the beginning with getting on the canoe, but then it's "extremely empowering" for consumers once they had the experience. Sebring Fire Department personnel will aid the consumers to get into the canoes as they did last year.

Cristian Perez-Centeno, one of the consumers, was accompanied by his mother, Migdalis Centeno, for the paddle

practice. They came to the United States from Aguas Buenas, Puerto Rico, two years ago. Perez has been a consumer at Ridge Area Arc for a year.

"He loves this place," Centeno said. "These people are amazingly wonderful. Yes, we really feel very happy and safe in this place. It's amazing all the activities that they do."

Centeno confirmed that her son will be attending the Heartland Peacemaker Paddle on Friday, and she'll be cheering him on. She added that the practice paddle was the first time Perez was on a

boat.

Deenn Wright, executive director of the Mason G. Smoak Foundation, said that events like these "really make your heart smile." She reported that this year's sign-up sheet filled up the first day with 22 students volunteering from all three high schools in Highlands County.

"Our students have told me that being in the presence of the Ridge Area Arc consumers just teaches them that everybody has different abilities," Wright said. "They love interacting with them. The inclusion shows my students that everybody has the

ability to get out and have fun. They just love partnering with them."

Wright mentioned that they will be starting an alumni program and that some alumni of the Youth Leadership Highlands program will also be in attendance Friday.

The Duke Energy Foundation made a donation of water and sunscreen for the upcoming event. The partnership is looking for sponsorships.

For further inquiries, contact Director of Development Donna Smolarick, email at dsmolarick@ridgeareaarc.org or call 863-452-1295, ext. 106.