

Hometown News

Martin County ■ April 2012

# Forever Young

A monthly publication celebrating the

boomers



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# Volunteers work to improve quality of life

By Shelley Koppel  
Associate news editor

STUART – Rob Ranieri, executive director of Keep Martin Beautiful, wants your help.

"An individual, organization or business can adopt a road, a beach or a park," he said. "You take responsibility for and commit to at least six cleanups a year to help keep it clean."

The program gives its participants satisfaction, but that is not the only benefit.

"It helps the county," Mr. Ranieri said. "We try to focus on areas that really need the help because they're highly trafficked. The county has budget challenges and when we help out with volunteers, everyone benefits. It's a value to the community and to tourists."

While the group would never turn away donations, it is the volunteers

who are the heart and soul of the program.

"We're a volunteer-based organization," he said. "Although we can always use the money, there are so many ways to volunteer. We have volunteers from 3 to 93. Even with the economy, our volunteer hours have risen. People still want to be involved and connected."

One of the group's newer projects is Oyster Reef Restoration. In partnership with the Florida Oceanographic Society, volunteers are taking bags of oyster shells and building oyster reefs in the river where they've been destroyed.

The group gets the shells from local restaurants or after beach cleanups, where hard articles such as shells are collected.

"We get all of that and the volunteers bag them into mesh bags," Mr. Ranieri said. "We go out with the scientists and engineers, and under their

expertise, volunteers build reefs in the river.

"Baby oysters are little floating globules. They have no shell and need a hard place to attach. This gives them a place to attach and grow. It creates a habitat that starts a process. Fish come around."

"It helps the sea grass develop because the water is not as turbulent. Adult oysters can filter 40 gallons a day. It helps keep the water cleaner. In the six to eight months since the original reefs were built, were already seeing life. It's pretty neat."

The group sets a date every month from March to December for volunteers to build reefs. If that work is too rigorous, volunteers can do shoreline plantings of native vegetation.

An upcoming project is the Great American Cleanup on May 5.

"We mobilize volunteers from all over Martin County to clean beaches,

parks and even vacant lots," Mr. Ranieri said. "Last year, we had several thousand volunteers. Some groups do their own project. We'll have people there to give supplies."

Sept. 8 is the International Coastal Cleanup.

"This is an annual global event," Mr. Ranieri said. "People from all over the world participate in cleaning beaches, lakes, streams and other waterways. Last September, we had nearly 2100 volunteers. We got to just about every beach, river and parks with water. We had boaters and kayakers to help pull out every bit of debris."

"Because it's an annual event, we keep a rough tally of what they pick up. We use it to understand which beaches need more attention and we compare our results with other communities around the world."

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## Life

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One of the startling statistics to emerge is that fully 45 percent of the litter collected is tobacco-related. In most places, that amount is about 22 percent. Keep Martin Beautiful is working to educate people about cigarette debris.

"Cigarette butts are not biodegradable," Mr. Ranieri said. "It's litter. It gets into the water and is a problem

for fish and turtles. We're working with school, Scouts and Boys & Girls Clubs. If kids bring the message home, adults are more likely to hear it and we're educating the next generation."

*For more information about Keep Martin Beautiful, call (772) 781-1222 or visit the website [www.KeepMartinBeautiful.org](http://www.KeepMartinBeautiful.org).*

*For more information about oyster reef restoration, visit the website [www.oysterrestoration.com](http://www.oysterrestoration.com)*