



From left, Andrea Gayle-Bennett, Patrick Arabie, and Wayne Johnson pose with their trophies from the sixth annual Veterans Freedom Fish event on Saturday. (Olivia Haydar)

Lynn veterans hook and reel at Freedom Fish

Olivia Haydar

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LYNN — More than 200 veterans joined the sixth annual Veterans Fishing Derby at the Blossom Street Pier on Saturday to go saltwater fishing for free with the help of local captains and organizations hosting the event.

The Freedom Fish Tournament event was hosted by Lynn EDIC, Lynn Housing Authority & Neighborhood Development, and Mayor Jared C. Nicholson's office, which worked together to help raise \$20,000 for local veteran organizations.



Over the past six fishing events, the city has raised \$120,000 to give back to those who have given their dedication and loyalty in active duty. This year, Nicholson presented a \$10,000 check to Lynn Veterans Council and another \$10,000 check was given to Disabled and Limbless Veterans.

Jim Cowdell, the executive director of EDIC, shared that this is the best event the organization gets to put on.

“It’s a way for us to give back to folks that were there when we needed them,” Cowdell said.

With the help of more than 40 local captains donating their boats and fuel for free, more than 200 veterans went fishing, and about 100 more got to enjoy time on the water without the stress of hooking and reeling because of the donation of brothers Jim and John Walsh’s boat.

“We had almost 45 boats donated by captains in the Lynn Yacht Club and the Volunteer Yacht Club,” Cowdell said. “So, they volunteer their boats, all of the fishing equipment, and they take the veterans out for a day of fishing.”

Bret Bennett has been donating his boat, time, and resources for all six annual events and said it’s only a small way he can give back to the veterans who put their lives on the line.

“It’s just the least we can do for what everybody’s done for us and the country, so it’s the least we can do,” Bennett said. “We have fun. It’s always a good time.”

On his 30-foot boat, he’s taken out a maximum of five people at a time, including himself, a friend, and two to three veterans. This year, Bennett and his crew caught a 32-inch striped bass.

The longest catch of the day, however, measured out to 47 inches, the longest fish to be caught since the event first started, Cowdell said.

Many people came to give a helping hand to make sure the veterans had a good time, and a solid lunch after almost four hours of fishing.



George Markos, owner of Brother's Deli in Lynn, donated more than 600 burgers, 600 hot dogs, buns, and snacks. He said the donation is nothing compared to what the veterans have done to make the country safe.

"It's a little gift I can give, a little gift," Markos said. "It is no big gift, but it's something I can do to appreciate the situation because I cannot do enough for them."

Markos has been doing this for all six years, and he said he will never stop.

Another volunteer, Maureen Bernard, the vice president mortgage loan officer at Reading Cooperative Bank, donated 65 cases of water for the event, totaling 650 bottles.

She shared that she grew up spending a majority of her time in Lynn, and the community-based environment soon became her family's culture. It has been a lifelong practice of giving back and volunteering her time, Bernard said.

"It's a way to give back to the community and give back to the veterans," Bernard said. "My dad was a veteran, you know, so it makes it even more special to me."

As a representative of the Commonwealth, Nicholson shared how this event has continuously been one of the most immersive and positive that the city has put on, and is thankful to everyone who made it possible.

"This is one of the most joyful and active, interactive events, and it's a wonderful way to reach deeper into the veterans and make sure that the people know we are grateful for what their service was," Nicholson said. "We're interested in getting to know them for who they are today, and I can see from who's worked on it, it's all from the heart."

After the weighing and measuring of all the stripers caught, trophies were given to the winners of the biggest and heaviest fish.

First place winner for heaviest striped of 15 pounds, Wayne Johnson, a U.S. Army veteran who served in Iraq, has been fishing at the Freedom Fish for the past five years.



“I just think it’s awesome what the city does to help veterans,” Johnson said. “Jimmy Cowdell has been fantastic in what he started six years ago, and just kept doing it every year. ... It was great going out there and great support with the captains helping us out.”

Andrea Gayle-Bennett, a 35-year Massachusetts Army National Guard veteran who served in Iraq, has been attending the fishing tournament for all six years it’s been running, and even though she’s left-handed and doesn’t do the physical reeling in of her striper, she has taken home trophies every year.

“It’s always a wonderful opportunity, just with camaraderie, fellowship; it’s just a wonderful opportunity to get together with your fellow service people,” Gayle-Bennett said.

Gayle-Bennett’s wingman who did the reeling, Patrick Arabie, a U.S. Navy veteran who served in Iraq, shared that one of his favorite parts of Freedom Fish has been connecting with his fellow veterans.

“It’s always fun to hang out with older veterans. I get to learn all kinds of stories, you know? She tells me all kinds of stories, and I tell her all kinds of stories from when I served in the Navy,” Arabie said, pointing at Gayle-Bennett.

Arabie was the winner of two trophies this year with the help of Gayle-Bennett and the boat captains. He took home second place for the longest fish, measuring at 45.5 inches, and third place for the heaviest fish, weighing 11 pounds.

The veterans who take part in the fishing or just have an excuse to get out of the house or senior center appreciate this tournament more than they can express, Cowdell said. One individual even came up to him, sharing it had been years since he had left the Veterans Home at Chelsea.

“He came over to me, and I said, ‘Thank you for your service,’ and he had tears in his eyes, and he said, ‘No, no, no, I haven’t been out of the soldiers’ room for two years. I want to say thank you to you,’ and it just puts everything into perspective, you know,” Cowdell said. “The irony is they’re thanking us.”

Gayle-Bennett added her thanks to every single organizer and volunteer who made that day possible for so many veterans searching for a connection.



“It really makes a difference in the lives of the veterans that are here in this community,” Gayle-Bennett said. “It really is just an opportunity to get together with other people who know exactly what you’ve been through, tell stories. It’s just a wonderful opportunity.”