

Zonta Club's chocolate fest raises money for serious cause

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Chef Instructor Debbie Buza arranges chocolate cupcakes.

A Zonta-style Christmas

In addition to the Chocolate Festival, the Zonta Club of Melbourne sells a unique collection of Christmas ornaments that are definitely homegrown. Every year, a new ornament depicting a Brevard landmark makes its appearance.

The professionally-crafted ornaments, sold at Meehan's in downtown Melbourne and online at the Zonta website, include tiny versions of the Cocoa Village Playhouse, Henegar Center, the Melbourne Ice House, the Kennedy Space Center Rocket Garden, the 1900 Building, Melbourne Beach Chapel, Melbourne Beach Pier and Strawberry Mansion, among others. Some, like the late, great

dragon of Dragon Point and Miguel's Restaurant, exist only in photos and the Zonta ornaments. They are available for \$20 sans stand and \$25 with stand.

For information, visit zontaspacecoast.org.

Ten years ago, Claire Ellis attended a program on human trafficking. What Ellis heard so shocked her so much that she decided to do something about it by joining the Melbourne chapter of Zonta International, an international organization dedicated to promote justice and respect for human rights and fundamental freedoms.

On a local level, Zonta raises awareness of human trafficking in Florida, helps women reach their educational goals and supports projects such as the Salvation Army's Pridmore Center, a shelter where homeless women and their children can get back on their feet.

To fund these initiatives, Ellis and the rest of the members of the Zonta Club must raise money. The group's biggest fundraiser is its annual Chocolate Festival, now in its ninth year. This year, the celebration of chocolate takes place from 11 a.m. to 4 p.m., Sunday at Eau Gallie Civic Center, 1551 Highland Ave., Melbourne.

For chocoholics, the Zonta Chocolate Festival is heavenly. Competitors from around the country present their finest chocolate concoctions to vie for bragging rights as "Brevard's Best Chocolate Fix of 2013." Among participants this year are Banana Blossom Cakes, Grimaldi Candy and Gifts, Keiser Culinary School, Love Bugs Bakery, Mather's Cake Shop, Matt's Casbah, Salvation Army/Pridmore Center, Sam's Club, TooJay's and Yellow Dog Café.

Woman and man cannot live by chocolate alone, so the festival also offers an array of savories donated by local restaurants, including Olive Garden, Island Pasta, Off the Traxx, Mary Lee's Lunch, Perkins, the Bald Strawberry, Panita Bakery. The culinary students at Keiser University are also providing other goodies to take the edge off all that chocolate consumption. One of the Chocolicious Chocolate Fountains will be flowing and the Melting Pot will offer a chocolate fondue buffet.

The county's Supervisor of Elections Office will lend two electronic voting booths for use to tally the votes during the event.

"It will be the first time in our history that we will know the winner before the festival is over," said Ellis.

General admission tickets, available at the door, are \$20 each and entitle guests to chocolate samplings, savories and non-alcoholic beverages. An upgrade is available for those who prefer their chocolate with an alcoholic bite. For \$30, "chocolate with a kick" tickets allow guests to enjoy wine and chocolate martinis.

More than 35 raffle baskets include restaurant certificates, hotel stays, floral arrangements, movie tickets, grocery store certificates, hair salon services, chiropractic care and even oil changes.

Under all the chocolate frivolity lies a very serious purpose in Zonta's Chocolate Festival.

Deb Buza, a former chef instructor at Keiser University's culinary school, volunteers as a cook several times a week at the Salvation Army's Sue M. Pridmore Center for Women and Children, an eight-apartment shelter where homeless women not only receive safe, decent shelter for their families, but also gain the skills necessary for self-sufficiency.

A co-chair for the Chocolate Festival, Buza walks the walk when it comes to helping. She believes strongly in Zonta's efforts, both locally and internationally.

"We're all about helping women in need," she said.

The Melbourne Zonta prepares welcome bags and blankets for the residents and pays day care expenses and bus passes so the shelter women can attend job training. They teach cooking lessons so the families can eat healthy while stretching dollars.

"These are not women who have been abused or have had drug problems," said Buza.

"Many of these women were stay-at-home moms. Their husbands left them and they have no jobs. Some of them had been living in their cars or in a tent. We work with the Salvation Army to get them on their feet. Zonta is all about advancing the cause of women and children."

Zonta donates to Serene Harbor and Sally's House and supports women's educational efforts by funding several scholarships in Brevard. The Women's Business Center at Florida Tech administers the Zonta/Meehan Scholarship for women of any age working to improve their self-sufficiency.

Additional scholarships include the Monica Jean Campbell Scholarship Fund, named in memory of a Melbourne High student killed by her boyfriend. The recipient of the Jane M. Klausman Scholarship competes for additional funds at the district and international levels. Melbourne Zonta also contributes to the Amelia Earhart Fellowship, given to women pursuing doctoral degrees in the aerospace field.

The organization is also particularly interested in raising awareness of the issue of human trafficking, which as Ellis notes, happens not halfway around the world, but right in Florida.

"Florida is just behind New York and California regarding the number of human trafficking cases," she said.

"We're a tourist-driven state, and with the tourists come the traffickers and their victims. Many people think these young women are from other countries, but many of them are runaways preyed upon by the traffickers. The problem is right in our backyards."