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Thursday, May 10, 2007

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## Committed to Cortez: Capt. Kathe Fannon lives for sea, village

By NICHOLAS AZZARA [nazzara@bradenton.com](mailto:nazzara@bradenton.com)

CORTEZ

On a balmy April morning by the bay, Kathe Fannon sits on the rear deck of the Star Fish Co., chatting on a rubber-encased cell phone. It's a utilitarian phone made to withstand the elements. It's the type of phone designed for people just like Capt. Kathe.

When her conversation ends, she begins another with a visitor, and it doesn't take long for her to turn to the history of her beloved Cortez fishing village, where she's lived for many of her 45 years.

"It's really changed. A lot of local restaurants don't buy fish from here like they should," Capt. Kathe says. "Like they used to."

With the exception of one regrettable stretch in 1982 when she moved to Atlanta, Capt. Kathe has lived in or near the village of Cortez all her life. That brief hiatus was all she could take.

She quickly discovered you could take the girl out of Cortez, but you can't take Cortez out of the girl. "It's really embedded in my blood," she says. After nine months in Georgia, Capt. Kathe returned to her roots in Cortez.

If Capt. Kathe waxes poetic about her town's rich past, she becomes downright impassioned when discussing its future. Parts of the village are almost frozen in time but may be threatened by new development in the not-so-distant future.

"One hundred out of 100 people come here to see Old Florida. It's heart-wrenching to think a developer can mess with a place that's as historical as we are," Capt. Kathe says. "This area should never be developed. We can't rebuild or duplicate this."

This unique fishing village and its past flow through Capt. Kathe's veins. She's a fourth-generation fisherman. For nearly all her life, she's been a commercial fisherman. For the past four years, she's piloted charter boat tours into Sarasota Bay. Each weekday she leads sightseeing, fishing and sandbar-hopping tours with tourists from around the world aboard Capt. Kim Ibasfalean's charter boats. At \$15 an hour per person, the company's rates are comparable with others in the village.

When visitors go out on sightseeing tours, there's a good chance they'll see some local wildlife. Karen Bell, owner of the Star Fish Co., said Capt. Kathe is "like a magnet" for dolphins and manatees, which people love to see.

"The success of that charter business is Kathe's personality," Bell said. "She's full of information, both historic and current. She knows everything going on around here. She's interesting. People like to listen to her."

Capt. Kathe isn't married to the sea, but to a shrimp boat captain. When she's not leading her own tours, she's doing work for her husband's shrimping operation.

"If (Mike) needs help, (Kathe) is the lifeline. She's a lot of people's lifelines. That's just good people," said Rhonda Kitchens, who is a self-described "rabid admirer" of Capt. Kathe after less than two years as her friend.

A pair of racoon eyes emerges when she removes her sunglasses: The constant exposure to sunshine has turned her skin dark with freckles, except behind the shades. The light streaks in her dark hair are further proof of a life spent largely outdoors.

Her work week never really ends, but to hear Capt. Kathe speak, she loves every bit of it.

"I never wake up and say, 'I don't want to go to work.' If you have any problems, once you leave this dock, they melt away. Everything is fine," she says.

Pup Pup, Capt. Kathe's 5-year-old cocker spaniel, is her first mate. The furry companion is never far from his captain, roving the wooden deck as far as his elastic leash allows. Pup Pup also has a weakness for seafood - on fishing charters, Capt. Kathe has to take three dozen extra shrimp as treats for her first mate.

Friends say Capt. Kathe's love for family, life, Cortez and work set her apart from others.

"She is Old Florida. She's beautiful, honest-to-the-bone, hardworking Cortez," Kitchens said. "She's a great believer in protecting the ecosystem. She's a very direct, loving kind of woman."

It's little surprise that the main staple of the Fannons' diet is, of course, seafood. She mentions the family fare while almost sheepishly pushing aside a half-eaten egg salad sandwich.

She's defensive about her breakfast: "I had to do something with our leftover Easter eggs."

Nicholas Azzara, county government reporter, can be reached at 708-7908.

**Kathe Fannon****Age:** 45**Local residence:** northwest Bradenton**Occupation:** charter boat captain**Birthplace:** Village of Cortez**Family:** husband, Mike Fannon; daughter, Katie Scarlett

Fannon passionate about Cortez, sea

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You can also e-mail the information to [jmorreale@bradenton.com](mailto:jmorreale@bradenton.com) or fax the information to her attention at 745-7097.

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