

Wild Game Dinner Benefits South Georgia Boy Scout Council

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ALBANY — For Lem Griffin, there’s no better training available for the area’s future leaders than through the South Georgia Council of Boy Scouts of America. That is one of the reasons he’s helped facilitate that organization’s biggest fundraiser, the annual Wild Game Dinner, since its inception more than 20 years ago.

On Tuesday, Griffin and the other members of the Wild Game Dinner committee, will welcome Boy Scout supporters from across South Georgia to Albany’s Potters Community Center for an evening of good food and good fellowship.

The dinner, which also includes both a silent and a live auction as well as a gun raffle, helps to support the South Georgia Council, which serves several counties in southern Georgia. Council counties include Dougherty, Lee, Terrell, Sumter, Baker, Mitchell, Worth, Early, Calhoun, Clay, Miller, Schley, Dooly, Crisp, Tift, Turner, Irwin, Wilcox, Ben

Hill, Jeff Davis, Coffee, Atkinson, Berrien, Cook, Brooks, Lanier, Echols, Clinch and Lowndes.

“It’s our biggest fundraiser of the year,” said Sam McCord, the council’s director of fundraising. “We have 28 counties in our council, and we serve up to 4,000 to 5,000 youths a year. It’s a big group.”

With a mission of trying to teach leadership skills and lifelong values such as being trustworthy, loyal, helpful, friendly, courteous, kind, obedient, cheerful, thrifty, brave, clean and reverent, the Wild Game fundraising efforts are important to the council. But Griffin said he sees the event as much more than just a way to raise money.

“It’s a fundraiser for the Boy Scouts, but I always look at it as more than just a fundraiser,” said Griffin. “It’s an opportunity to bring the community together.”

Griffin, a successful businessman, said he first got involved with the Wild Game Dinner when he went several years ago with a friend to a Council board meeting at Camp Osborne, an 850-acre Scout reservation that was donated to the council in 1948 by Chase Osborne.

“The sheriff at that time was Jamil Saba. He and I were good friends, and he asked me to ride out to Camp Osborne,” recalled Griffin. “Me being an old Boy Scout, I rode out with him. This was in the late ’80s or early ’90s.

“Well, they had a board meeting while I was there, and it came up that they had this bill for \$80,000 and they needed \$10,000 to pay the interest. They made a motion to pay the interest, but nothing on the principle. That stuck with me. I was like, ‘What’s going on here?’ And then I did the fatal thing, I asked the question. They challenged me and said, ‘Well, Lem, figure out a way to get rid of it.’”

Having grown up in Southwest Georgia, where hunting, and by extension wild game, is extremely popular, Griffin said he got an idea.

“I said, ‘Well, everybody loves food,’ and the people of South Georgia like quail, dove, deer, turkey, so I came up with the idea of a wild game dinner and hunt auction,” he said. “The auction part of this is where I contacted land owners to donate quail, dove, deer and turkey hunts for two people, or father and son, if you will.”

Griffin used his contacts around the area to set up donated hunts and other hunting-related items for auction, and after a few years the event started to grow in popularity. Soon, it had become one of the area’s premier events. And, Griffin said, it didn’t take long for the event to help the council pay off that original loan and then some.

“We started off slow; I bet I didn’t have 75 people at the first dinner. From there, we just expanded,” said Griffin. “We started out with volunteers. The board at that time, they wrapped their arms around it, and the peanut industry, the pecan industry, the ag community were very supportive. I think the most we ever raised was \$150,000.

“But I guess what I’d have to say is, I don’t know how many times I paid that debt off. We burned the note several times.”

In addition to helping the South Georgia Council out financially, Griffin said the event has also been successful in bringing the community together.

“I think I was a little bit selfish in not really trying to raise maximum dollars, but create maximum attendance,” said Griffin. “So, early on, we prepared enough food for 3,000 people. Our crowd was somewhere in the 2,000 range for several years.”

More importantly, though, the Wild Game Dinner and accompanying auction have helped promote Scouting, which Griffin credits as being one of the most important things he was involved with as young man.

“This is about Scouting,” he said. “If we can encourage someone to come and get involved, we’ve done well.

“I was a scout. Unfortunately, I wasn’t an Eagle Scout, but I participated. I got to spend about three years out at Camp Osborne in the summer, and I really learned a lot. I feel like, through my business years, I always tell folks that Scouting gave me a benefit that I wouldn’t have otherwise had.”

Griffin said Scouting taught him how to be a part of something and also a lot about leadership, which is at the core of the organization. The lessons Scouting teaches, Griffin said, are among the reasons the volunteers who organize the Wild Game Dinner work so hard to make it a success.

“It’s the best youth development, leader development, program out there,” said McCord. “We build leaders, and it doesn’t matter what kind of family or income level they come from. It’s for everyone, no matter where they come from. We’re here to develop leaders for the community. We’ve been around for 106 years, so we’re doing something right.”

“I think Scouting is more important today than it ever has been,” added Griffin.