

The following story from May 13, 2016 is being linked by permission from The Item in Sumter, S.C.

Wateree Correctional dedicates pond, fishing pier **Inmates build facility for special needs children**

BY IVY MOORE

ivy@theitem.com

Friday the 13th was a fine day for a tour of the new pond and fishing pier at Wateree River Correctional Institution. The sunny, cool morning brought out about a dozen people involved in the conception and construction of the new catfish pond, calm and glass-smooth, with a big, handicap-accessible pier.

Warden Don Beckwith beamed as the admiring crowd, which included a few "civilians," arrived in shifts for the 10 a.m. dedication. Jacob Bryant, 19, came with his stepfather, Mike Griffin, to be the first to test out the pier. It projected into the pond quite a way, its entrance blocked by a yellow ribbon waiting to be cut after the official dedication by Beckwith.

Bryant, an avid hunter and fisherman who uses a wheelchair, waited under a tent with his dad and others as the crowd grew. He'd come all the way from Jefferson to be the first official fisherman on the pier.

"I like to fish," Bryant said. "I'll catch just about anything that can bite — bream, catfish, sunfish, crappie, bass. I want to catch a big ol' bass. They fight a little — they can tire you out."

Unfortunately for Bryant, there were no fish in the pond Friday, just three very small alligators that were soon to be removed, before the pond was fully stocked. The Catfish Pond, as it will be known officially, and pier grew out of the involvement of Beckwith and other members of the Institute's staff with the Outdoor Dream Foundation, S.C. Department of Natural Resources' Take One Make One program and Wounded Warriors, said Clark Newsom, internal communications director for S.C. Department of Corrections.

The Outdoor Dream Foundation "provides outdoor adventures to children who have been diagnosed with terminal or life-threatening illnesses," while the SCDNR program teaches "safe hunting to students who have no previous outdoor hunting experience," according to their official mission statements. Both are nonprofit

organizations. The pier at the correctional facility is not limited to Outdoor Dream Foundation or Take One Make One participants, will "make it easier for those with special needs to occasionally enjoy fishing with friends in a controlled environment," Newsom said.

Beckwith said other structures, including a large gazebo, will eventually be added to the site.

"We want to bring kids out here to teach them how to catch fish, clean and cook them and then show them how to eat 'em," he said.

He explained that the pond and the pier are "totally manmade" — John Gardenhire, the institute's carpentry shop instructor, designed the pond and pier, and he and three of his students provided labor, clearing the overgrown land of trees and underbrush, digging the five-acre, 5-foot-deep pond and constructing the pier, which is equipped with handrail posts and stations for those using wheelchairs.

Delano Rogers, who lives near Wateree River Correctional Institute, donated the 8-inch valve that allows water to flow from the "Big Pond" into the Catfish Pond. Tony Betancourt of Construction Equipment Operations had the idea of building an island and taught the inmates how to do that using heavy equipment.

Gardenhire said the hands-on experience of the project will also prepare his inmate students with skills that should result in gainful employment upon release.

Total cost for the pier was "about \$10,000," Gardenhire said. The pier was made possible with donations of lumber and hardware from Lowe's of Camden, Pollard Lumber Company, Shaw Lumber Company and Keziah Lumber Company and some funding from SAFE Federal Credit Union in Sumter. SCDNR will stock the pond with catfish, and fishing equipment will likely be provided.

With completion of the pier delayed by the October 2015 flood, Beckwith said May 13 was a long time coming and the culmination of hard work, dedication and the collaboration of the institute, organizations, companies and individuals.

"People can get things done if they work together," he said. The crowd assembled as Beckwith offered a prayer to open the pier for use, dedicating it to those responsible for it and to those who will be using it.

Once he, Gardenhire and Danny Robinson of Lowe's cut the ribbon, Bryant entered the pier and tested one of the wheelchair stations.

"This is just right," he said, noting the height and positioning of the rails, as he tracked the slow movements of a couple of the pond's alligators, no doubt anticipating catching a few catfish and a big ol' bass.

Pond Dedication Pictures with Captions to follow Newspaper Article



Mark Farrell, left, coordinator of the S.C. Department of Natural Resources' Take One Make One program, and SCDNR Aquatic Education Coordinator Sarah Chabaane, right, present a fishing outfit to Jacob Bryant. Bryant volunteered to be the first to check out the new pier and pond at Wateree River Correctional Institution.



The new Catfish Pond and Pier at WRCI



WRCI Carpentry Instructor John Gardenhire, left, and Warden Don Beckwith, middle, with Danny Robinson of Lowe's of Camden's PRO Services, cut the ribbon to open the Institution's new 5-acre catfish pond and handicap-accessible pier.

