

COMMUNITY RALLIES FOR BEGONIA FEST'S FINAL YEAR



LUCJAN SZEWCZYK — SANTA CRUZ SENTINEL

Jessica Bond, Sam Storey, and Jennifer Walker, from left, of Depot Hill Athletic and Drinking Society. The trio along with other members of the group are reviving an old group tradition of building floats for the Begonia Festival's nautical parade.

Begonia Festival Groups return to give Labor Day celebration enthusiastic send-off

By Calvin Men

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CAPITOLA » Jennifer Walker was 5 when she worked on her first Begonia Festival float.

At the time, she and her mother had just moved to Santa Cruz. They had joined the Depot Hill Athletic Society — a social group — and had their fingerprints on several floats.

That group retired from float building in 1985. But members of the group, their children and

grandchildren are coming back for one last hurrah.

"I would say the best has yet to come because the real fun is the week of the festival," said Walker, now 47.

The Begonia Festival is in its 65th and final year. A storied Capitola tradition, the flowers have since the become less popular and common in the states. So much so that Golden State Bulb Growers in Watsonville — the last stewards of the flowers in the Western Hemisphere and one of the largest donors to the

festival — decided to shut down its begonia arm of the business in November of 2016.

Festival organizers were able to convince Golden State Bulb leaders to support one last festival.

The festival itself had lost much of the luster from earlier years, with the number of floats in its nautical parade dropping down to single digits.

Once word got out that it was the last year, enthusiasm spread like wildfire. The Capitola City Council adopted the begonia as

the city's official flower. People came to officials with memorabilia and stories from past years.

"People [are] sending us photos and statements of their love of the festival and their interest in being part of our commemorative event," said Laurie Hill, president of the festival.

The final festival kicks off Thursday night with a concert and continues through Labor Day weekend with begonia murals and community events. The nautical parade is set for 1 p.m.

BEGONIAS » PAGE 3

Begonias

FROM PAGE 2

on Sunday.

Nels Westman, a long-time participant in the festival, remembers some of the earlier iterations of the parade. In years past, float builders would start the begonia wars — a cathartic moment after the parade where the people who crafted the floral vehicles tore them apart. The flowers littered the lagoon leading into the ocean and city officials breached it, releasing countless begonias into the ocean.

That tradition disappeared with time and the nautical parade dwindled as well. Recent parades were lucky to get six floats.

But for the final year, 11 groups are on deck to create their own floats.

One of them is Walker's group, The Depot Hill Athletic and Drinking Society, which has not constructed

EVENT LINEUP

For a schedule of the Capitola Begonia Festival, visit <http://begoniafestival.com>.

a float since 1985. While the festival's final year helped the group decide to come back, it was the death of one of the founding members, John Johnson, in 2016 that sparked it.

At a memorial service nearly a year after his death, the decision was finalized, Walker said.

And the group's theme for their float pays homage to Johnson, the group's history and the festival: Shipping out to Sea.

"The previous members at the memorial were saying they were too old to construct anything anymore," Walker said. "So my sister (Jessi Bond) and I decided to take the lead on organizing it."

They aren't the only ones pushing the envelope for floats.

Westman is putting his heart into building a float



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From left, Jennifer Walker, Sam Storey and Jessica Bond, of Depot Hill Athletic and Drinking Society. Walker and Bond grew up helping to decorate floats with the group while Storey is an original member.

at 74 years old. Westman is a part of the group named the Riverview Rascals, who are reviving an old biplane float. Their theme: "Now Departing...Begonia Flight #65."

"In one capacity or another since 1980, the Begonia Festival is the official end of our family and neighborhood summer," Westman

said. "Now we're going to have to find something else to do."