

# York Lions Club offers day of fishing for the blind, visually impaired

This is the 50th anniversary of the York County Lions Club annual Sight Impaired Fishing Trip.

By **Marie Albiges**

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**M**argaret Holmes wasn't about to end her streak at 13 fish caught in the Chesapeake Bay.

It was unlucky, she was told, but the **Ocean Eagle** charter boat was docking soon after a cool morning out in Hampton. She had one more chance.

As she felt the boat slow and heard the engines come to a stop once more, she slowly got up from the bench, searching for the railing and her fishing pole that would get her past that unlucky number.

"Five more minutes," the captain called, and Holmes, who is blind, let her line drop once more. She squealed a few minutes later when she felt a tug.

"I got a fish!" she exclaimed for the 14th time with a grin, reeling in a tiny striped bass.

Holmes, of Yorktown, was one of about 25 people aboard the Ocean Eagle Thursday who are visually impaired. They were invited to spend a day fishing with the York Lions Club, whose members have been putting on the event for 50 years.

Some attendees, like Holmes, were partially blind from birth and lost their vision later in life; others were fully blind all their lives.

Still others, like Ben Farmer, lost their sight as a result of an accident or illness.

A recreational fisherman before he lost his sight because of diabetes, Farmer said the hobby doesn't feel much different now that he's blind.

"It's all in the feel of the hand," he said.

He and many others have been coming on the fishing trip for several years, driving in from all over Hampton Roads and even as far as Richmond and North Carolina.

Started by York Lions Club member Forrest Fisher in 1968, the event has taken on many forms over the years.

In August of that first year, 12 visually impaired men caught 105 fish on a charter boat that launched from the Yorktown wharf. Later, they had dinner on board the boat.

In 1971, one woman joined 17 men on private boats.

Some years, the fish were scarce. Others, like on Thursday, the fish — all 135 of them, most in the form of croakers, sea bass, puffer fish and silver perch — jumped.

Volunteers from the Lions Club were on hand to help with baiting, reeling and releasing fish (only a few big ones were stashed in a cooler). Their ranks included the great-grandson of the trip's founder.

**The Lions Club** also conducts vision screenings and provides glasses for students.

April Gasper, a vision specialist who teaches life skills to visually impaired students in the classroom, said the visually impaired community is often precluded from such activities because it's hard for them to find transportation.

She said recreational activities like fishing are important for the visually impaired, because it gets them out of the house, and they should be able to do nearly any activity a sighted person would do.

"It's an opportunity to get outdoors," she said. "It's really hard for the blind and visually impaired to do things physically."

Suzette Sapp, whose father is a Lion but couldn't be on the trip, has been volunteering by offering rides to Hampton and lending a hand on the boat.

“I tell them it’s my favorite day of the whole year,” she said.

As the boat made its way back to the dock in time for lunch, Holmes, the woman who reeled in 14 fish, put her head on her friend’s shoulder, worn out by the morning’s events.

She hadn’t caught the most — the record was somewhere around 18 — but she said she’d done pretty well.

‘It wasn’t the best, but I think I was near the top,’ she said, adding, “I’m happy when I get on this boat.”

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