

TALKING WITH ...

## Skip Bryan

Bryan, of the Village of Lynnhaven, is a member of the Friends of the Florida Sheriffs Youth Ranches.



By LEAH SCHWARTING  
Daily Sun Staff Writer

### THE VILLAGES

Every year, anywhere from 200 to 250 children walk through the entrances to Florida Sheriffs Youth Ranches. Once they arrive, they're made welcome by the efforts of staff, volunteers and outside groups such as the Friends of the Florida Sheriffs Youth Ranches.

The youth ranches have existed since 1957, with more than 141,000 children participating in their programs to help avoid delinquency. The ranches have locations across the state, with the closest one to The Villages being in Live Oak.

The Friends is a local organization that was formed with the goal of being cheerleaders for the children. It's an informal group that communicates mostly through email. They collect school supplies and other items for children, send holiday cards and take trips to visit the children at the ranch.

Right now, they're getting ready for their December

trip to the ranch. The Daily Sun recently caught up with Skip Bryan, of the Village of Lynnhaven, to talk about their preparations.

**Your next trip is Dec. 13. Is there anything that will be special about this trip?**

That is their holiday banquet, so it will be great to be there and sit in on one of their big activities for the year.

**You have delivered school supplies and welcome kits to the youth ranches in the past. Is there anything you're trying to collect right now for the December trip?**

We don't wait until we're taking a trip to collect things, so we have a schedule for this season, which has something for every month... in October we did birthday cards, November we're doing Thanksgiving cards, December we're doing Christmas cards with \$25

Wal-Mart gift cards. So if we get 10 we'll do one cottage, if we get 20 we'll do two cottages, if we get 60 we'll do six cottages.

For January we had the idea, "Why don't we see if some people want to knit winter caps for kids?" And maybe there's a knitting club or just a ladies' group who wants to knit caps for kids, so we can use up to 60. February last year we did Valentine's cards for all 60 kids, and one of our groups bought 60 chocolate bunnies. And then when we can, we also do cards for the cottage parents to encourage them, like at Christmas, Easter, Valentine's. We buy cards that are encouraging and we try and include a handwritten note.

**And the cottage parents are the ones acting as children's parents in the cottages with them?**

The cottage parents the kids refer to as Mom and Pop. Cottage parents are couples and they are there 24/7. But then one week a month they get a week's break and there's rotating substitute cottage parents (who) come in. So there's like 10 sets of cottage parents.

**What do you think it does for the children to be able to receive these cards or these kits?**

We're not trying to establish personal relationships between our individual members and any individual kid, but we're trying to let them know that somebody cares about them, encourage them, and we just do that through cards with handwritten messages and little

things that we do. From the staff and from the kids we've gotten letters of appreciation and handwritten notes. Some of the handwritten notes from the kids are just super. The staff at the ranch is their family now, so we are just like cheerleaders or encouragers.

**If anybody's interested in going on your next trip or getting involved in collecting some of the cards and items, is there a good way to get in contact?**

If they're interested in looking into becoming a friend, contact me by email (rskipbryan@aol.com). And then, if they think they might be interested in doing a financial gift, contact Arvid. (Arvid Cowell is the area donor relations officer for the Florida Sheriff's Youth Ranches. He can be reached at acowell@youthranches.org).

*Leah Schwarting is a staff writer with The Villages Daily Sun. She can be reached at 753-1119, ext. 9333, or leah.schwarting@thevillagesmedia.com.*



*Experience a live concert of the classics where you can reach out and touch the musicians*