‘And there it was’

Teen who found Epiphany cross has Tarpon Springs in his blood

BY MICHELLE BEARDEN
The Tampa Tribune

TARPON SPRINGS — This one was for Grandpa.

When 17-year-old Louie Pappas emerged from Spring Bayou on Thursday, clutching the covered white cross, he made Jack Louis Pappas’ day.

“It’s my 81st birthday,” the elder Pap- pas proclaimed through tears. “It’s such a special day. He catches the cross on my birthday.”

On the 105th anniversary of the Epiphany celebration, it was a boy whose name is synonymous with Tarpon Springs who got the special blessing. Retrieving the cross tossed in the bayou by Archbishop Demetrios of the Greek Orthodox Archdiocese of North America is a highlight of the daylong celebration.

The teenager is the great-grandson of Louis Pappas, founder of the renowned namesake restaurant. His grandfather and two great-uncles, including one who died just before Christmas, are credited with turning the Tarpon Springs Sponge Docks into a tourist destination.

Louie Pappas, one of 76 Greek boys ages 16 to 18 who made the plunge, found the cross in murky water in 17 seconds.

“I just dove in, opened my eyes, and there it was,” he said afterward in the sanctuary of St. Nicholas Cathedral. “It’s

SEVENTY-SIX BOYS Dived into Spring Bayou for the cross, and Louie Pappas, 17, came up with it. The trophy came later.

The boys, poised in a half-circle of tethered boats, wait for the signal to dive for the cross.
Epiphany
From Page 1

been a few years since a guy from Tarpon got this. I'm very humbled.

By all accounts, Pappas is popular. Given the enthusiastic reception he got from his fellow divers and the hundreds of people who crowded into the church, this victor deserved the honor.

Friends and family described Louie, one of four children of Louise and Rosanne Pappas, as the "real deal" and "genuine."

"Everybody loves Louie," said his uncle, Chuck Sullivan, a lawyer. "He's the kind of guy who looks out for the kids who are not part of the 'in' group. He's just a good kid."

Sullivan treated his law office staff to a day off to attend the Epiphany festival. Several took him up on the offer and got to see their boss's nephew get the cross.

A junior at Tarpon Springs High School, Louie is the quarterback for the Spongers football team. Both his father and grandfather played the sport there as well, and both went on to play for the University of Florida.

"And that's what we hope for Louie," his proud grandfather said. "Three generations of Gator football players — now that would be something."

The morning gray sky gave way to patches of blue by midday, with thousands of spectators lining the streets for the Greek Orthodox parade of costumed children, clergy and the teen divers in their uniform T-shirts.

The Tarpon Springs festival is the largest of its kind in the county, opening with a traditional liturgy in the cathedral and ending with an eight-hour Glendi at the Spanos-Pappas Community Center with live music, dancing and food. This year's event had a special addition: the release of 105 doves after the cross dive to mark its anniversary.

"There's nothing like this anywhere. Not even in Greece," said Maria Kefili, whose son was one of the divers. "This is part of our civilization, part of our culture. It makes you feel so proud to be Greek."

Maria Kalamatoy, who teaches modern Greek at Yale University, turned the Epiphany into a field trip. Four of her students accompanied her from the Connecticut Ivy League school to witness the celebration firsthand.

"You can read about it and discuss it, but there's nothing like experiencing it," she said. "This particular ritual is so unique that I thought the students should take it in as part of their studies. Yes, it's a pretty cool field trip."

Lynn Kopala moved to Tarpon Springs a few years ago from Washington, but she's never had a chance to take part in the event. She teaches government contracting across the country and usually is on the road.

"This time, I scheduled my whole weekend around this," she said. "My husband and I have fallen in love with this community. And a day like this, even if I'm Swedish, makes me feel such a part of it."

Jack and Martha Young of Morrisville, Pa., are spending the winter in Palm Harbor in their recreational vehicle. They decided to brave the crowds to take in some of the local color.

And they weren't disappointed.

"This is like party time for the Greek church," Young said. "God bless them. This is a chance to show their faith and have some fun."

As for the teens diving in the water? Not for him, Young said. "I'm no polar bear," he said. "But I'm happy to sit back and watch them and wave."