

The Boatnik Celebration of Grants Pass **By Dennis Powers**

The Grants Pass Active Club has held its Boatnik event along the Rogue River since 1959 on every Memorial Day weekend at Riverside Park (Highway 99 and East Park Street). Taking the entire year to plan, this five-day event is its sole fundraiser and has raised hundreds of thousands of dollars over the past fifty years for children and youth programs. With numbers of volunteers working on this occasion, the highlight of Boatnik (named for Sputnik, the first satellite) is its widely known hydroplane race that takes place on Memorial Day.

The activities start Thursday evening at the park with food, rides, games and activities. Friday usually includes a fireworks display on the river. Saturday starts with the Boatnik parade that ends at Riverside Park; activities continue there over the weekend with sprint and drag boat racing, carnival rides, arts and crafts, a pizza eating contest, Bingo, food vendors, and numerous other events. On Memorial Day, the Tom Rice Memorial White Water Hydroplane Race is on. This event is named after Tom Rice, a local State Marine Deputy who was very well liked, highly regarded, and lost his life in a 2002 helicopter crash on the river. More activities, a free sundae giveaway, and a second night of fireworks follow.

All of the funds raised from Boatnik by the nonprofit Active Club are earmarked for an impressive list of recipients. In supporting different programs, donations are made to 4-H programs, poor children, Pop Warner Football, the Boys and Girls Club, Girl and Boy Scouts of America, American Little League baseball, DARE, high school scholarships, youth soccer programs, and school programs. The club has purchased playground equipment for local parks; helped needy children and families during the holidays by providing toys and coats; and has provided nearly a hundred thousand dollars in scholarships to area seniors since this program's inception.

One of Oregon's largest festivals, the big draw is the hydroplane racing. The drag boat racing over the weekend and hydroplane time trials on Sunday focus attention on the coming Memorial Day hydroplane, white-water racing contest. With timing lights and a scoreboard, sheer speed shows when the racers and their boats perform. The drag boats typically race from 120- to 130-mph and can finish the 1/4-mile course in 6-1/2 seconds. The sprint boats can travel up to 80 mph in their races, but with tight turns through the buoyed course in front of Riverside Park.

The Tom Rice Memorial is the biggest race for the annual Oregon-California River Racers Series and is two complete laps at this time between Riverside Park and Robertson Bridge, thirteen miles down the river. Whether speeding over the Rogue River filled with rocks, rapids, tree limbs, other racers, or racing around a tight buoy course, a certain amount of fearlessness is definitely in order. And all of this is for charity.

Sources: "Boatnik: Purpose," at [Boatnik](#); "About the Active Club" at [Grants Pass Active Club](#); Larry Cathey, "Hydroplane Race Should Be One Wild Ride," May 27, 2011, *Daily Courier* at [About Hydroplane Racing](#); "Cal-Ore. Hydroplane River Racers; Boatnik 2011 Whitewater Race," at [Youtube Hydroplane Video](#).