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## MARINER SANDS CHAPEL HISTORY

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### IN THE BEGINNING...

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In January 1979, Erling and Sheppard Speer moved to Stuart to develop Mariner Sands. Over the years many ideas, concepts and designs were thought and rethought as to how to create a financially successful golf course community, as well as enhance it with families who could relate well to one another and to the community of Stuart.

In the fall of 1980, the Speers were driving through the North Carolina mountains and passed a small and charming roadside chapel. This sight triggered fond memories from each, and a spontaneous conversation ensued. The common thread seemed to be how did these little chapels draw and hold small communities together, not only for spiritual purposes but community gatherings as well. In addition, these chapels often had small, community cemeteries beside them, as did this North Carolinian one.

Mariner Sands had and has a quirk. There is an acre of land, independently owned by a family of Ashley descendants in the middle of the property. A cemetery sits on this site containing the burial remains and headstones of a group of train and bank-robbing fellows called the Ashley Gang. So what if, in the upcoming land design of Phase II or the new development to the right side of Mariner Sands Dr., we could dedicate an adjacent parcel next to the cemetery for a chapel/ community center ... at last, the birth of an idea.

The Speers both worked and lived in the community and eventually met John and Carol Hallenbeck, newly arrived residents from Lost Tree Village in North Palm Beach. Over dinner one night, John was describing Lost Tree and its in-house chapel, which he and Carol had attended.

Ideas and thoughts were exchanged, and it was agreed that both couples would attend a service together in the next few weeks. They experienced the chapel as formal, conventional, and seemingly used for religious purposes only. Not quite what the Speers had envisioned, but the idea was still intriguing.

### THE CHAPEL FOUNDING COMMITTEE

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In 1982, John Hallenbeck was appointed Chairman of a Founding Committee to explore the real possibility of having a non-denominational chapel inside the community. There were enthusiasts and there were dissenters, all quite vocal. The community would raise the funds to build and maintain the building, but the land and architectural fees would be donated by the development company. A year or so passed and in March 1983, Erling Speer

announced at the annual Property Owners Meeting that the chapel plans would proceed. The Founding Committee would be the first Board of Trustees and the necessary legalities to establish a non-profit corporation, Mariner Sands Chapel, Inc. would be filed. The first officers were: Tony Bradford- President, John Hallenbeck- Vice-President and Sheppard Speer- Secretary/Treasurer.

The first agenda enacted by the Board was to send out a two-page questionnaire to a total of 620 property owners and members. When the results were tabulated there was enough interest to justify moving forward with the project. It was decided to have an architectural competition among three architects; the eventual winner was Armin Wessel. His original design needed to be scaled down, but by the summer in 1984 the modified design and estimate of the cost was in hand. In November of that year the plot plan (next to our infamous cemetery), a building layout, a front elevation showing how the structure might look and a cost estimate was sent to all the club members and property owners. John Hallenbeck organized a Chapel Fund Drive. Committee members made calls to the property owners asking for donations and pledges. Many individuals contributed their time, talent and creative ideas to the chapel's success.

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#### EARLY WORSHIP SERVICES AND FUNDRAISING EVENTS

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Originally, chapel services were held in the Garden Room at the Club when guest ministers were available. On a memorable Sunday there was a service and Tony Bradford found an unbelievable check in the offering basket: one for \$50,000. Sheppard Speer took the contributor, a renter not a property owner, out to lunch and posed her curiosity as to the nature of this wonderful gift. The woman related that she had just come into an inheritance from someone she didn't care for and found great delight in giving it away. The irony was that in the same week, the estimates for the five major wooden beams that supported the roof had come in with an astronomical cost of \$50,000. We had our beams.

On Easter morning for several years we would have a sunrise service and breakfast by the pool: \$20.00 per head was a fundraiser. Carlyn Laser chaired a cookbook committee. Marcia Balzereit, Helen Bishop, Jill Blanton, Mil Lombaer, Jan Proudfoot and Flo Ward manned the phones for all of us to submit our favorite recipes and published the "Mariner Sands Cookbook", cover designed by Cattee Bradford and illustrations by Peggy Bushman. It was a huge project and brought substantial money to the fund. Elizabeth Burman Patterson, another artist and founder of the Treetop Artists in the Chapel, took the architectural rendering and designed a Christmas card for us to sell. We sold a bunch. There were theme parties such as a Country and Western night, an outrageous Halloween event and Christmas carolers with Santa, all to raise money.

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#### GROUND-BREAKING, CHAPEL BUILDING AND MINISTER CALLING

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On April 20, 1986, the site was dedicated. A groundbreaking ceremony made it official. Dr. Jack McCombe from the Lost Tree Chapel and Father Guinan presided. On December 21, 1986, our first activity was held in the Chapel before it was even complete. The South Fork High Ambassador Choir entertained us and led an Old Time Hymn Sing. During this time, the Pastoral Search was going forward. There were 22 candidates.

We heard 9 and the Committee either interviewed or corresponded with the other 13. It was narrowed to 5 viable candidates.

### OPEN DOORS OPEN HEARTS

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On March 1, 1987, the chapel doors opened for the first official service. Dr. Bruton Strange, who had married the Speers 12 years earlier, dedicated the building and Dr. Bern Brunsting, our newly selected minister, conducted the first service at 9:00 A.M. The Speers daughter Meredith was christened in a private ceremony at 8:30 A.M. the first of many christenings to come. 75 pots of yellow chrysanthemums were borrowed from a local nursery destined for Miami and the Pope's visit the following week. A cake was served to 161 Charter Chapel Members.

Between March and the end of May, guest ministers conducted the services. Ethel Henley, a resident, established the first choir and was the musical director. Wally and LaDon Johnson donated the organ. Dr. Brunsting agreed to commence our weekly services on October 11, 1987. 80% of the Chapel was paid for on that first day.

Before coming to us, Bern was the minister of Christ Church on Quaker Hill north of New York City, a church that, like the Chapel, serves all denominations. For 13 years before that he served in Scarsdale, N.Y. with many distinguished New Yorkers in his flock, including Lowell Thomas. Bern, a captain of a B-17 Flying Fortress in WWII, was a close friend of Norman Vincent Peale and substituted for him in his pulpit at times. Under Bern with his great sense of humor, the Chapel flourished and grew.

In October 1987, the Chapel's charitable endeavors began when Sheila Rhodes proposed the idea of an Operation Outreach with funds going to two local charities. A cart raffle, silent and live auction, a gourmet dinner and donations raised our first \$27,997.64 for the Jesus House of Hope and the Samaritan House for Boys.

In 1988, Operation Outreach included a golf tournament with a golf-cart raffle. In later years a tennis tournament and croquet tournament were added, and the cart raffle was adjusted to offer either a cart or \$5000.00 in cash, plus other prizes. Since 1988 funds from the tournaments and raffles, plus patron support and contributions from the Chapel's Benevolence Fund, have totaled just over \$2,500,000 with 100% of funds going to the charities. The list of charities has now grown to include The Boys and Girls Club of Martin County, the Holy Cross Service Center in Indiantown, Hibiscus Children's Center, Hospice of Martin County, YMCA of Martin County. It can be noted that \$20,000 was donated to jump-start Molly's House, plus substantial funds for other local charities. The White Dove program was established.

During the 1988-1989 season, various activities such as workshops, Bible Study, meetings of various Mariner Sands community organizations, an active book exchange, Sweet Adeline Chorus, South Fork High School Chorus, motivational sessions for Mariner Sands employees and art classes and shows through the Treetop Artists were enjoyed. The Caring Committee was formed. Extra good news was the Chapel was now debt-free.

Original history input from Sheppard Speer – April 2008