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FEATURED

Chesapeake Beach man travels to Alabama for humanitarian effort

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Submitted photo

Phil Campbell, a.k.a. "Chesapeake Beach Phil," working in the Prince Frederick Rotary Food Trailer. Recently retired from the U.S. Navy, Campbell will travel to Phil Campbell, Ala., in June to assist the town in recovering from a tornado that hit five years ago. He will be joined by others also named Phil Campbell.

There are 816 miles, or 1,314 kilometers, between Chesapeake Beach and Phil Campbell, Ala. (yes, there is a town named Phil Campbell). For Chesapeake Beach resident Phil Campbell, those are just coordinates on a map. The 40-year-old intelligence officer in the United States Navy has traveled all around the world.

“I’ve crossed every line of longitude on the planet on a plane, most of them on a ship, and every line of latitude between Cape Horn, South America to Ketchikan, Alaska — all on a ship or submarine,” stated Campbell on a profile page on the internet.

Campbell, in an interview, said he is going to make the trek to the namesake “scrappy li’l town with a lot of heart,” along with a dozen and a half others named Phil Campbell from the U.S. and abroad.

The purpose of this trip is to bring aid to Phil Campbell, Ala., a 4.1-square-mile stretch of land named after a railroad engineer from the late 1800s. The town, with a population fewer than 1,200, suffered massive damages from an EF-5 tornado that hit in April 2011. A tornado with such a classification has winds greater than or equal to 200 mph, which can rip buildings from their foundations.

“I know firsthand the destruction of a tornado,” said Campbell. “I grew up in Louisiana and many nights were spent in the hallway with a mattress over my head. The house next to ours was flattened.”

Campbell, who is also a member of the Prince Frederick Rotary Club, lives by the club’s motto, “Service Above Self.” He and the other Phil Campbells are planning to meet June 17 and 18. The gents, to include a Phil Campbell from Australia, and a lady named Phyl Campbell from Schoolcraft, Mich., have a service project scheduled to rehabilitate a trail that has collapsed and been covered with brush and trees by the tornado that struck five years earlier.

The namesakes haven’t met yet, but they coordinate and stay in contact via social media and email. “Going to Phil [Campbell, Ala.] will be like a reunion, not a first meeting,” said Campbell.

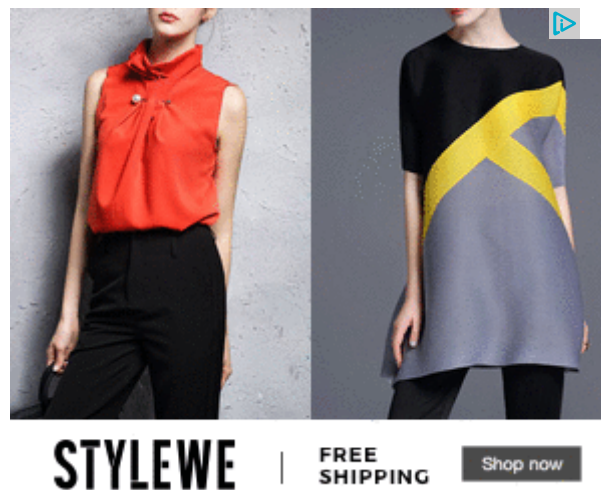
One might only imagine how awkward the introductions will be. “Hi, Phil, I’m Phil.” Not so, according to organizer Phil Campbell of Brooklyn, N.Y. To avoid confusion, each Phil Campbell is referred to by his or her town first then followed by first name. So, he is Brooklyn Phil and the local is Chesapeake Beach Phil.

Brooklyn Phil said he started a convention of the Phil Campbells back in 1995 after learning there was a town with his name. The original convention was well attended by 22 men named Phil Campbell and one woman named Phyllis Campbell.

Brooklyn Phil has organized the return of the Phils in '96, '97, 2011 and 2016. The group even has its own website, ImWithPhil.com, used to raise awareness and profile the numerous Phil Campbells who participate.

“Our gathering of Phils kind of inspired their efforts to have a town festival,” shared Brooklyn Phil, referring to the town’s annual Phil Campbell HoeDown, which since 1996 coincides with the Phils’ convention.

The convention has turned into a humanitarian effort, after the tornado hit just six weeks prior to a planned gathering. At the suggestion of Phil Campbell from Nottingham, U.K., Brooklyn Phil used this as an opportunity to help the town, not cancel their event.



“We’ve done quite a lot with the town ... from group fundraising efforts for Habitat for Humanity to individual works such as buying Christmas gifts for needy kids selected by someone in town,” said Brooklyn Phil.

In addition, the greater group of Phils participated in a Kickstarter campaign to raise funds for a documentary film titled “I’m with Phil,” which details the group’s continuing effort to help the town recover. Chesapeake Beach Phil said the group raised \$20,000 through the online crowdfunding platform.

Chesapeake Beach Phil had planned to attend the 2011 event, after connecting with Brooklyn Phil on Facebook. However, he could not because shortly before the scheduled gathering, he and his family moved to Chesapeake Beach from Athens, Greece, and they all became sick from the long journey.

The service-minded Chesapeake Beach Phil said he is really looking forward to attending the post tornado five-year anniversary gathering and pitching in this year in aiding the town.

“This is a punctuation on my career,” said Chesapeake Beach Phil, who retired from the Navy on May 25 after 22 years of service. “I look forward to servicing the citizens of Phil Campbell, [Ala.]”

To get there, he will have to fly into Birmingham, Ala., get a rental car and drive one hour and 40 minutes to Russellville, Ala., because Phil Campbell, Ala., does not have a hotel. Then he will drive another 20 minutes to the gathering. For Chesapeake Beach Phil, the journey to fellowship with 15 new friends and assist the inhabitants at 34°21°05′N, 87°42°27′W, will be well worth the trip.

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