

Carrie and Claire begin their journey

By Cori McWilliams

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(Editor's Note: The Vero Beach Newsweekly was lucky enough to receive this eye-witness account of the Disney Vero Beach Tour de Turtles release from 9-year-old Cori McWilliams, who will be entering the fourth grade at Liberty Magnet School later this month. Miss McWilliams has been a volunteer with the Barrier Island Center/Sea Turtle Conservancy the last two years. She is also available to show and discuss a Powerpoint slide show she has created on sea turtle conservation. Miss McWilliams is also a finalist for the 2013 Oceana Junior Ocean Hero Award.)

INDIAN RIVER COUNTY -- "Carrie" and "Claire" from the Disney movie "Monsters University" were once just monsters, but now they're reptiles, too!

On the bright and sunny morning of July 27, visitors at the Disney's Vero Beach Resort watched the release of sea turtles Carrie and Claire on the beach behind the resort. The release was hosted by Disney's Vero Beach Resort and the Sea Turtle Conservancy as part of the Tour de Turtles event.

Tour de Turtles started in 2008. Each year, approximately one dozen sea turtles in Florida and the Caribbean have transmitters attached to their shells so they can be tracked by satellite.

Whichever tracked sea turtle swims the furthest distance in three months "wins" the Tour de Turtles. The event was created to raise awareness about threats to sea turtles, such as boat strikes and poaching. The turtles participating in Tour de Turtles are not injured or rehabilitated; they are randomly-picked females that have laid their eggs on the beach the evening before each release.

While waiting for the releases, visitors lined up to view the turtles, each in a wooden crate. Game and activity tables were set up next to the release area, and children and adults could learn more about sea turtles at the activity tables by playing games and doing activities such as an educational bean bag toss and crawling through a turtle-safe shrimping net known as a "TED."

With hundreds of visitors cheering for her, Carrie was the first turtle released from her crate. Her carapace [shell] measured 108 centimeters from front to back, and Sea Turtle Conservancy staff said she weighed close to 325 pounds! The sun made Carrie's brownish yellow-colored body glow. Carrie crawled out of her crate, past visitors standing on each side of her track, and towards the ocean. A few minutes later, Carrie reached the ocean and swam away. The goal of her release was to raise awareness about how light pollution affects sea turtles.

Next was Claire. Her carapace measured 94cm from front to back, and she weighed close to 275 pounds! Claire took her time crawling, and stopped to rest a few times before reaching the ocean. She finally reached the ocean a few minutes later and disappeared beneath the water. The goal of Claire's release was to raise awareness about the threat of plastic debris in the ocean.

After Carrie and Claire were released, visitors left the area and the beach was back to being very quiet.

The migration of Carrie and Claire and the other Tour de Turtles competitors can be tracked online at www.tourdeturtles.org.



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