



Robert Dula

Celebrating Life, Celebrating Love

IMAGINE THIS IDYLIC SETTING: floating around in a lagoon, enjoying the beautiful weather of the Emerald Coast, meeting new people, watching romantic couples, listening to lively music and relaxing. It's a typical day at work for gondolier Robert Dula, owner of Gondolina Emeraldi, a gondola concession that operates in the lagoon of Sandestin's The Village of Baytowne Wharf.

A native of Lafayette, La., Dula has had a lifelong fascination with boats of all types.

"One of my childhood dreams was to have a gondola after watching James Bond 007 Moonraker," Dula said.

Dula learned the art of the gondola in Venice, and on his tours he wears the tradi-

tional attire – a striped shirt and straw hat. His handcrafted boat, Bella Mae, is made from eight different woods, and its simple, sleek shape and character invite romance and relaxation. Who wouldn't want to be wined and dined, and genuinely charmed, by picturesque scenes while listening to relaxing music with that special someone?

Gondola rides last about 25 minutes. The price changes seasonally but generally is \$10 per adult and \$5 for children between the ages of 5 and 10. Children under the age of 5 and dogs ride free.

Dula recently spoke with *Emerald Coast Magazine* writer Erica Spivey about his rather unique profession.

Robert Dula propels his gondola in the Baytowne Wharf lagoon.

EC: Where and when was your gondola built?

RD: Bella Mae was handcrafted in a Venetian boatyard owned by an American boat builder named Tom Price. She was completed in early 2004. She is a tribute to my mother. When she was being constructed, I had the craftsman carve my mom's name in the woodwork on the top of the boat.



EC: How many original Venetian gondolas are there in the United States?

RD: There are about two dozen original gondolas currently in the United States and only about 400 still in operation in Venice.

EC: Apparently several people have gotten engaged on your boat. How many?

RD: Twenty-four couples have been engaged on Bella Mae and two couples here in The Village of Baytowne Wharf.

EC: You have said before that you have the best job in the world. Why?

RD: I am living out one of my childhood dreams. Also, I feel like I get to give something back to humanity by promoting one of the world's most precious natural resources – love. In addition, the people I get to meet, the beautiful atmosphere I get to work in, and – most importantly – the fact that I don't feel like I am pursuing a job. Instead, I feel it is a calling for me to be a gondolier.

EC: You have had quite an adventurous experience operating gondola concessions. What have you witnessed during your career as a gondolier?

RD: I started my first gondola concession in Pensacola, Gondola di Pensacola, in March 2004, and then Hurricane Ivan came in September and I had to find a new place to operate my boat. After searching, I came across New Orleans and City Park, so I set up "Nola Gondola" there in March of 2005. And then six months later Katrina came and I found myself going through the same ordeal I went through with Ivan . . . sinking the boat to save her and riding out the hurricane.

EC: Does it take a lot of work to learn how to propel the boat?

RD: A fair amount of training is required. I spent two months practicing in Boston with gondolier Joseph Gibbons, and he has been my backbone through this whole adventure and has trained me a great deal.

Dem Bones

Prevention is the key in fighting the debilitating effects of osteoporosis

By **Triston V. Sanders and Erica Spivey**

With no symptoms, osteoporosis is a thief that slowly steals the calcium in your bones. And it starts its work when you're 30 – or even younger – deteriorating your bones and putting you at greater risk for fractures of the hip, spine and wrist.

Are you at risk? If you are a woman, your chances of developing osteoporosis are greater. The older you are, the greater your risk. If you are a small, thin-boned woman, you are at greater risk. Women of northern European descent you should be concerned. And people who have a family history may also be at risk of the disease.

Those are the risk factors you can't change. But there are also lifestyle choices that can impact your chances of developing osteoporosis. People who ingest a diet low in calcium and people who have inactivity due to decreased weight-bearing exercise are at increased risk of osteoporosis. If you are a smoker or drink alcohol excessively, your risk of bone loss and fractures gets even worse.

Help yourself by making sure you're getting enough calcium in your diet. Optimal calcium intake for people between the ages of 19-50 is about 1,000 milligrams of calcium per day. Those 50 and older need about 1,200 milligrams of calcium daily. Post-menopausal women not using hormone replacement therapy and men and women older than 65 need 1,500 milligrams per day along with 800 milligrams of vitamin D.

Weight-bearing exercise goes hand-in-hand with nutrition. It enhances what you're trying to do with food intake and with the calcium

in your diet. Even walking 20 to 30 minutes a day can keep your bones stronger and in turn, decreases your risk of a fracture. Simple things qualify as weight-bearing exercises, such as climbing stairs, dancing, speed-walking, jogging, racquet sports and hiking. Shelia Herbermann, radiology technologist and spokesperson for osteoporosis and bone health at Sacred Heart Hospital says it is important to check with your physician prior to jumping into any exercise so that you can be aware of all concerns. "Especially with our bone health as we get older and with other risk factors we need to know how strong our bones are before engaging in physical exercise," says Herbermann.

A bone density test – a simple, painless form of diagnostic X-ray – can help you find out if you have osteoporosis. And, if you are diagnosed with osteoporosis, prescription medicines are available to keep the bones from losing further calcium and decrease the chance of having a fracture. They have minor side effects, so you need to be under the care of a doctor while you're on them.

Osteoporosis is a silent disease. You may not be aware you have it unless you have a DEXA scan done or a broken bone from the weakness caused by osteoporosis.

"Not only is the DEXA scan used to determine if you are osteoporotic, it is also used to monitor treatment for those who are on medication for osteoporosis," says Herbermann.

Sacred Heart on the Emerald Coast offers the DEXA scan at their new Women's Imaging Department.