Thank you, Lisa, for taking time to answer some questions about Clearwater's world-famous Pier 60 Sugar Sands Festival and how you came to be the multi-talented woman who makes it all happen.

Lisa, your name is synonymous with the Clearwater Pier 60 Sugar Sand Festival. I'm sure there's more to know about you as we start this interview. Before we talk about all things "fun in the sun" … can you let us know your history here in Clearwater?

Were you born here?
I am a lifelong resident of the Clearwater area.

Where did you go to school?
I attended St. Paul's School and Belcher Elementary for my elementary education. For middle school, I went to Oak Grove Middle. Continuing my academic journey, I completed my high school education at Pinellas Park High School. I further pursued higher education at the University of South Florida, where I obtained a B.A. in Criminology.

Career path? (early career path)
My career in the hospitality industry began during my high school years at Brinker International, where I had the opportunity to work at Chili's. I was named Employee of the Year and continued to work there for five years as an administrative assistant. Later, during my senior year of college, I transitioned to work alongside my fiancé, Steve Chandler, who owned the Beach Diner located on Clearwater Beach.

Can you tell us about your family?
Since 1994, I have been happily married to my husband, Steve, and together we have been blessed with four wonderful children: Charissa, Allie, Fields, and Bella and one granddaughter, Emory. Our children have had the privilege of growing up immersed in the vibrant world of the hospitality industry on Clearwater Beach and have contributed to our family businesses.

You and your husband Steve have been business owners on Clearwater Beach for over 30 years. What type of business ventures are you involved in?
The early stages of our career were marked by our ownership of Beach Diner, a 50s-themed establishment that was situated in the present-day roundabout location. This charming diner served breakfast, lunch, and dinner, and was renowned for hosting classic car shows during the weekends. In 1995, we were awarded the bid for what has now become Pier 60 Concessions, a prominent destination known for its world-famous sunsets. In 2005, we proudly opened Barefoot Beach House, a sister location to Pier 60, which encompasses food, beverage, and retail services. Additionally, we operate the umbrella and cabana rental services along the public section of Clearwater Beach.

Since its inception in 1995, we have actively dedicated our time and efforts as volunteers with the Sunsets at Pier 60 Society Inc., a 501(c)(3) nonprofit art organization. Sunsets at Pier 60 Society Inc. is responsible for hosting the Sunsets Celebration at Pier 60, a nightly event featuring local artisans and street performers. We take immense pride in our ongoing involvement with this extraordinary initiative, which showcases the rich artistic talents of our community and contributes to the cultural atmosphere of Clearwater Beach. Over the years, the Sunsets Festival produced numerous community events highlighting appreciation for the arts and encouraging residents and visitors to come to the beach during off-season such as Beach Fest, Festival of Lights and Sunset Cinema. The most popular and longest-running Sunsets produced event is the Pier 60 Sugar Sand Festival.

Readers can learn [more] about Clearwater's world-famous Pier 60 Sugar Sand Festival and here: https://www.sugarsandfestival.com/p/about
Certainly, if readers have experienced the Pier 60 Sugar Sand Festival they know about the beauty of the sand sculptures, the exciting entertainment options, the family friendly atmosphere, and the fantastic food selections. What do you find most exciting about what goes on "behind the scenes?"

The intricate process involved in transforming sand and water into a museum-quality art exhibit is truly captivating. It all begins with meticulous planning, where we carefully conceptualize the theme and try to envision the experience we want to create as you walk through the exhibit. The next phase involves building the necessary infrastructure to support the event's festivities, concerts, food and beverage areas and walking paths. From the labor-intensive task of moving vast quantities of sand inside the tent to provide sculptors with their medium, to witnessing the incredible artistry of the 16 sand sculptors as they passionately shape and mold their masterpieces, every step of this creative journey is a testament to the dedication and craftsmanship that goes into the Sugar Sand Festival.

What are some of the educational initiatives that Pier 60 Sugar Sand Festival is engaged in?

At the Sugar Sand Festival, we go beyond building sand sculptures to provide educational opportunities to students in our local area. We offer field trips for elementary school students where they tour the exhibit and learn about the art of sand sculpting. They also learn about the importance of the gulf and beach conservation, with the assistance of Keep Pinellas Beautiful. At the end of their trip, children enjoy captivating street performer shows, learn about the art of busking and different forms of artistic expression. For the public, anyone can attend free sand sculpting classes led by one of our master sculptors.



It's reported that the 17-day Pier 60 Sugar Sand Festival has an economic impact in our community of over $31 million. How is this number calculated?
The economic impact of the event is assessed through a comprehensive study conducted by Destination Analysts, Inc. To gather data, various methods are employed, including the accumulation of reporting expenses, in-person intercept surveys administered to attendees, and the collection of analytical data and surveys from the event organizer, exhibitors, and sponsors. This multifaceted approach ensures a thorough assessment of the event's economic impact.

What is most challenging about planning for the Pier 60 Sugar Sand Festival and how far in advance do you begin that planning?

Planning for each annual festival begins well in advance, even before the current festival opens its doors. During the build-out for the current festival, we begin talking about next year's theme, make a list of what we need to do differently next year and have to begin applying for the following year's grants.

One of the most challenging parts of organizing the festival is the development of sponsorships and acquiring the essential funds to transform the festival vision into a reality. Our community partners play a vital role in making this event possible. Securing sponsorships and funding requires us to establish strong relationships with local businesses, organizations, and individuals who share our passion for the arts and its impact on the community. These community partners become valuable allies, providing financial resources, in-kind donations and other forms of support that enable us to bring the event to life.

On-site, the second most notable challenge, which also happens to be the festival's greatest strength, revolves around the sand itself. Hosting an event in a beach setting presents certain difficulties when it comes to creating a functional event space. For staff, trekking through the sand for long hours each day can be physically demanding, which makes it essential to stay hydrated and wear layers of sunscreen. The environment also poses additional challenges for setting up structures and equipment. Everything must be exceptionally sturdy and constantly cleaned and swept due to over-exposure to salt water and sand.

It's my understanding that the Pier 60 Sugar Sand Festival relies on hundreds of volunteers to make everything run smoothly. Can you comment on that and let people know-how they can learn more if they'd like to get involved with your nonprofit organization?

The Pier 60 Sugar Sand Festival owes much of its success to the invaluable contribution of over 600 dedicated volunteers who filled essential shifts such as ticket takers, greeters, ID checkers and more during each year's event. Their commitment and hard work play a vital role in making the festival a memorable experience for everyone. We deeply appreciate the invaluable support of our volunteers, as we simply could not accomplish this without their selfless efforts. If you are interested in becoming a volunteer for the upcoming festival, we encourage you to visit our website at www.sugarsandfestival.com, where our volunteer portal will open in January 2024.

Do you have any favorite themes of past festivals?
Personally, I don't have a favorite. Each year, it's interesting to see the different styles of sculpting by the different artists and how they push the boundaries of sand sculpting.

You've talked about the possibility of having a permanent Ferris wheel near the beach. Why do you think that's important, and do you have any other "wishes" for our beach as far as amenities or design?

While a permanent Ferris wheel might not be financially feasible year-round, having a Ferris wheel during the summer months or peak periods could be a more realistic option. This would allow us to offer another experience to our visitors while also highlighting the breathtaking beauty of Clearwater Beach from a unique vantage point. The temporary nature of the Ferris wheel would also add a sense of anticipation and exclusivity, making it a must-visit attraction during the busiest times of the year.

The Sunset Festival previously held nightly movies on the lawn area of Pier 60 Park with a large projector screen, sponsored by the local hotels and restaurants. Though the attendance remained consistently high, over time, the level of local support diminished, leading to insufficient funding and the discontinuation of the cinema. I'd love to find a way to bring it back.

One of my amenity wishes is to have a pathway reaching the shorelines of Clearwater Beach, ensuring visitors with limited accessibility can dip their toes in the water and fully experience the beauty of Clearwater Beach.

What do you like most about Clearwater?

Growing up in Clearwater and spending summers on Clearwater Beach has deepened my love for this destination. It holds a special place in my heart, and I feel fortunate to call it home. The fact that we reside in a location that others dream of vacationing in is not lost on me. One of my favorite parts of

living in Clearwater is being so close to the water. My family and I love to go boating, whether it be for a fishing trip, to go to nearby Honeymoon Island or to watch the sunset.

If you had a magic wand, what one thing would you change about Clearwater?

I believe there is a strong need for a higher education facility in downtown Clearwater, one that specifically focuses on hospitality and/or marine biology due to the city's unique location. Given that tourism is the primary driver of our economy, establishing such a facility presents a remarkable opportunity to expand our infrastructure and branch out into another industry outside of tourism.
It could attract new housing options, restaurants, and retail establishments, creating a vibrant ecosystem that complements the upcoming Coachman Park and The Sound.

Favorite sports team?
Tampa Bay Lightning

Favorite restaurant, park, or "hidden treasure" in Clearwater?
There are too many to list, however, my favorite local restaurant is Rumba Island Bar and Grill, owned by my best friends, Maria Papas and her late husband, Nick Papas.

What do you like to do in your spare time – if you even have any (haha!)?
Boating adventures, catching up with old friends, watching my granddaughter and family dinners are among our favorite activities. I've also heard pickleball is the latest trend and would like to learn to play!

Favorite quote or motto you like to live by?
A girl should be two things: classy and fabulous. – Coco Chanel