

For as long as I can remember the Fishing Rodeo has been a part of my life. I was born and raised in Destin, to Darla Smith & Michael “Mo” Helton. Long before I could appreciate what the Destin Fishing Rodeo meant for our community, I was already immersed in the world that makes it possible.



DESTIN'D TO BE DIRECTOR AMBER HELTON

BORN ON THE WATER
My mother worked at the Harborwalk Charters booking booth, helping visitors connect with the incredible fishing experiences that have made Destin famous, while my father spent his career as a mate aboard many of the boats in our charter fleet, helping anglers create memories

on the water. Because of them, my childhood was spent on the docks, around the boats, and among the fishermen who built this community. The harbor wasn't just where my parents worked—it was where I grew up. The captains,

mates, business owners, and fishing families who made their living on the water became an extension of my family and helped shape the person I am today.



Sea Robin, more like catch Robin

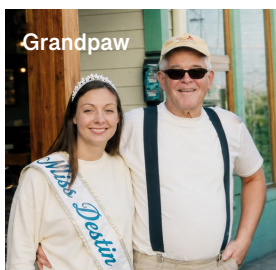


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Fishing isn't simply a pastime; it is a way of life. The waters that surround our town provide not only livelihoods but also memories, fellowships, and lessons that will stay with me throughout my life. Both of my parents introduced me to the fishing lifestyle that has been such an important part of my life. My mother has shaped the values that have guided me along the way. She has encouraged me to embrace new experiences, travel the world, and never miss an opportunity to serve others. Her unwavering support has given me the confidence to pursue opportunities that help me grow, while her example taught me the importance of kindness, gratitude, and having a servant's heart. Those lessons in community involvement and service would eventually lead me to one of the most rewarding

experiences of my young adult life—representing the city I love as Miss Destin. There has always been something special about Destin that tugs at my heartstrings; it extends beyond the harbor and into the community itself. In 2005, I competed in the Miss Destin pageant and was honored to be selected as Miss Congeniality by my fellow contestants. To this day, it remains one of the most meaningful recognitions I have ever received because it came from the young ladies who shared that experience alongside me. That same evening, I was blessed with the honor of being crowned Miss Destin. Wearing the crown and sash meant far more to me than a title—it was an opportunity to celebrate the people, traditions, and hometown that had shaped my life.



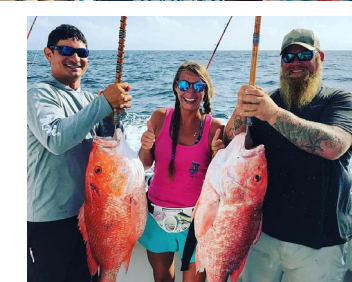
My year as Miss Destin holds a special place in my heart. It gave me the opportunity to represent the city I treasure through countless appearances, parades, ribbon cuttings for Target and the Destin History & Fishing Museum, youth fishing events, and our annual community celebrations. Spending 31 days in October, with the weigh-in barge as my throne, I celebrated with thousands of anglers when the boats backed in to weigh their catch. That month deepened my appreciation for the people, organizations, and traditions that make Destin such a remarkable place to call home. More importantly, taught me the importance of community service and engagement, and preserving the heritage that makes our "Luckiest Little Fishing Village" so special.



AMBER HELTON

Another pivotal chapter in my journey came during my time as Event Coordinator for the Boathouse Oyster Bar. In that role, I had the opportunity to organize and oversee multiple fishing tournaments, including the Summer Slam, which spanned June, July, and into August, celebrating our town's summer fishing season. That experience allowed me to wear many hats. I helped secure sponsors, register boats, coordinate event logistics, weigh and record catches, maintain tournament standings, and ensure every detail was handled from start to finish. I often joked that I was the tournament's biggest cheerleader because I genuinely loved celebrating every boat and angler's success and sharing in their joy. The organization, camaraderie, relationships built with captains, anglers, and sponsors, and the opportunity to create memorable experiences for people who shared a passion for fishing, I thrive in every aspect of tournament management. I am immensely grateful to the Schofields for entrusting that role to me.

Looking back, that position proved to be one of the most influential experiences in preparing me for where I am today. It was a steppingstone that gave me valuable



hands-on experience and reinforced a long-held dream of mine of promoting the fishing traditions and culture that have been such an important part of my life. My connection to the Destin Fishing Rodeo extends far beyond attending it as a local or growing up around it. Over the years, I have had the privilege of volunteering in nearly every facet of the Rodeo, gaining a firsthand appreciation for the tremendous effort required to make this cherished event a success. I've served as a Rodeo judge during weigh-ins, writing up fish entries, and have helped sell merchandise alongside Ann White and Becky Mac in the merchandise trailer. One of my most memorable experiences came in 2021 when I was tasked to take over the weigh-in scales for the first five days of the Rodeo. I have had the privilege of working side-by-side with Mrs. Helen Donaldson, learning many of the behind-the-scenes operations that most attendees never see. From entering catch data and managing records to understanding the countless details that keep the Rodeo running smoothly, I gained invaluable insight into the dedication and organization required to preserve this longstanding tradition. My involvement with the Rodeo continued to grow, and in 2024, I was honored to serve as Chairwoman of the Rodeo. That leadership role allowed me to work even more closely with volunteers, anglers, sponsors, captains, and community partners. I gained a deeper understanding of the planning and coordination required to produce an event of this magnitude. Each role provided a unique perspective and allowed me to work alongside the dedicated people who are the heart and soul of our town's longest-standing tradition. As I have prepared to step into the position of Director, I find myself reflecting on a few remarkable coincidences. This year marks twenty-one years since I was crowned Miss Destin 2005, a role that first gave me the opportunity to serve as an ambassador for the city I love. I am the same age today that Mrs. Helen was when she became Director of the Destin Fishing Rodeo in 1998.



Over the years, Mrs. Helen has generously shared her knowledge, experience, and passion for the Rodeo with me. She has taken me under her wing, patiently teaching me the countless details that go into producing an event of this extent. From the technical aspects of Rodeo operations to the traditions that have made it a beloved institution for generations, she has been a mentor, teacher, and friend.



As the Destin Fishing Rodeo enters its 78th year, I am incredibly grateful for the confidence Mrs. Helen has instilled in me and for the time she has invested in preparing me for this opportunity. Her guidance has helped me approach this new chapter with both excitement and respect for the responsibility it carries.

Fishing is more than a tradition in my family—it's part of our legacy.

My late grandpa, Frank, is remembered by many as one of the pioneers of cobia fishing in our area. He created and patented the famous Ding-A-Ling jig, a lure that became well known among generations of anglers. That passion was carried forward by my father, Michael "Mo" Helton, who continued producing the Ding-A-Ling and spent his life on the water as a respected mate in our charter fleet. His passion for fishing and innovation on the water helped leave a lasting mark on the Destin fishing community.

Through both, I inherited not only a love of fishing but also a deep appreciation for the people and traditions that make this community so special. In February of this year, my Daddy-O passed away. While losing him has been one of the most difficult experiences of my life, it also reminded me just how extraordinary this

DESTIN'D TO BE DIRECTOR



Gone Fish'n for shore ...



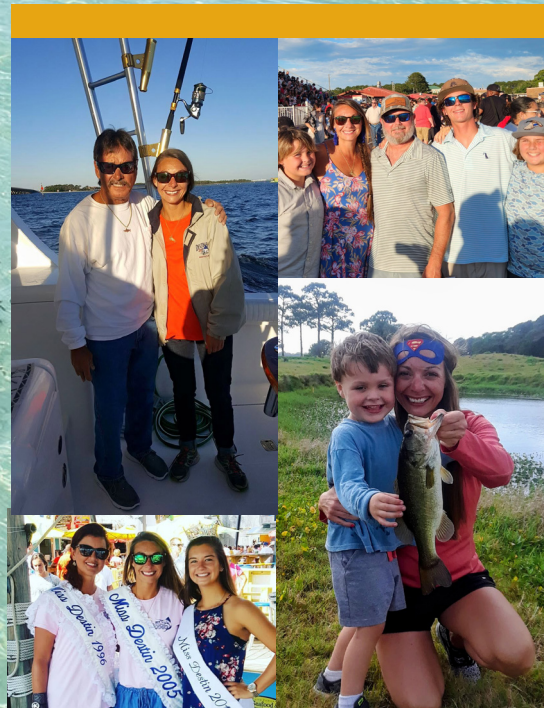
community truly is. During his burial at sea and celebration of life, nearly twenty boats joined in procession to honor him. As I looked across the water and saw friends, captains, and our fishing village coming together to pay their respects, I was overwhelmed with gratitude and

pride for the place I call home. In that moment, I felt more connected than ever to the community that raised me. Destin's fishing tribe is built on tradition, respect, and a shared love of the water. There is competition. There is camaraderie. But at the end of the day, we are a community.

FISHING LIFE

That day served as a powerful reminder that while fishing may bring us together, it is the celebration of our heritage that keeps us connected.

The fishing lifestyle that defined my childhood continues to shape my life today. My man friend, Captain BJ Teems, and I are raising a blended family of three boys who share the same love for fishing, boating, and life on the water that we grew up with. As lifelong Destin locals, we understand how



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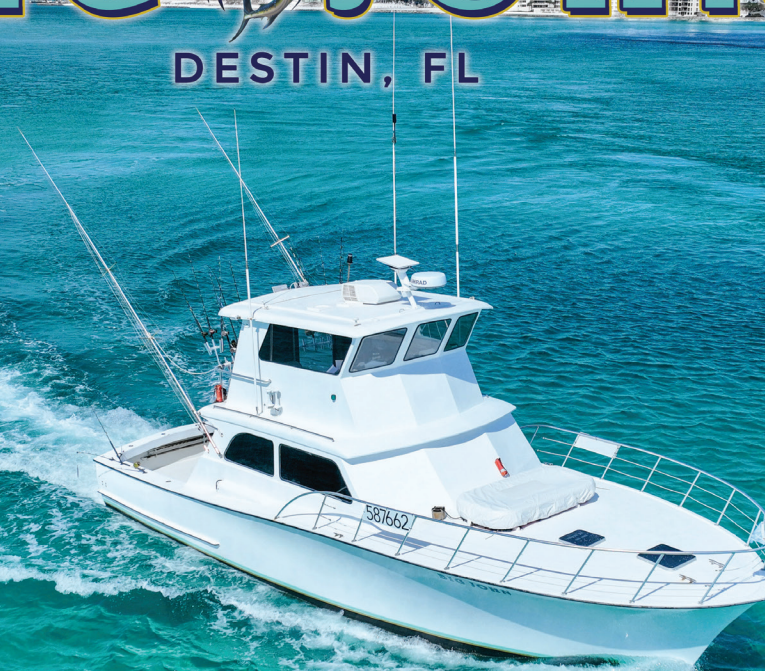
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A FISHING FAMILY

fortunate we are to call this place home, and we have always wanted our children to experience the same connection to our waterways and our outdoor way of life that meant so much to us growing up.

We are, at our core, a fishing family. Over the years, I have been fortunate enough to reel in some memorable catches of my own, but these days, the greatest joy comes from watching our boys experience those moments for themselves. Seeing the excitement on their faces when they land a fish, hearing them tell the story afterward, and watching them create memories on the water remind me why traditions like the Destin Fishing Rodeo matter so much. Those experiences are about far more than the fish. They are about family, friendships, and a lifelong appreciation for the place we call home.

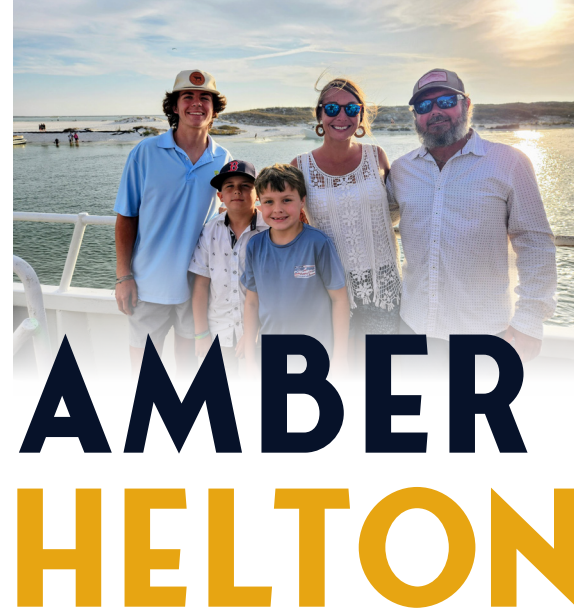
As I step into this new role as Director, I am especially grateful that my mother continues to be part of the Rodeo family. Each October, she can still be found volunteering wherever she is needed—whether judging fish weigh-ins, helping in the merchandise trailer, or supporting me and this event behind



the scenes. Her servant's heart and love for this community continue to inspire me, and I am blessed to have her beside me as I begin this new chapter.

As I step into the role, I think not only about the generations that came before us, but also about the generations that will follow. I never imagined my first year as Director would be my first Rodeo without Bruce. He welcomed me as his new "boss." While October will be slightly different with his absence, the Rodeo will continue to honor his legacy.

The Destin Fishing Rodeo has been part of my story for as long as I can remember. When I look at the path that brought me here—from growing up in a fishing family, to serving as Miss Destin, to coordinating fishing tournaments, to volunteering in nearly every capacity the Rodeo has to offer, to serving as Chairwoman, and now Director—I am filled with gratitude and excitement! It helped shape my childhood, connected me to my community, and introduced me to many of the people who have influenced my life. Now, I have the privilege of helping write its next chapter.



AMBER HELTON

For a girl who grew up on the docks of the World's Luckiest Fishing Village, surrounded by fishermen, boats, and the traditions that make Destin so special, serving as Director of the Destin Fishing Rodeo feels less like the beginning of a new journey and more like the continuation of one that started many years ago.

I am extremely grateful for the heartbeats involved in the Rodeo; our members, committees, volunteers, sponsors, and every pair of hands that are excited and happy to continue this beloved tradition. As I often say, "It takes a village, and we have THE BEST one!"

I am Amber Helton, your new Director of the Rodeo.

You could even say I was destined for it.

Happy Rodeo! 🐟



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