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THE MARATHON WEEKLY (ISSN 1944-0812) IS PUBLISHED WEEKLY FOR \$125 PER YEAR BY WEEKLY NEWSPAPERS, INC., 9709 OVERSEAS HIGHWAY, MARATHON FL 33050. APPLICATION TO MAIL AT PERIODICALS POSTAGE RATES IS PENDING AT FORT LAUDERDALE FL AND ADDITIONAL MAILING OFFICES.

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POSTMASTER:
SEND ADDRESS CHANGES TO THE KEYS WEEKLY, 9709 OVERSEAS HIGHWAY, MARATHON FL 33050

News Deadline
Tuesday Noon
Advertising Deadline
Tuesday 2 p.m.

@KeysWeekly
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ON THE COVER

Jaxson Cameron, left, and Mackie Childress drop their lines off the *Marathon Lady* during the 19th annual Key Colony Beach Kids Fishing Derby. See page 10.
SANDRA LEE PHOTOGRAPHY/
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HISTORY MADE

Key Colony Beach installs first female police chief, honors 21 years from DiGiovanni

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The smallest police department in Monroe County just made Florida Keys history. On June 18, the Key Colony Beach City Commission finalized the installation of Jamie Buxton as the city's new police chief, taking up the mantle from retiring Chief Kris DiGiovanni – and earning the title of the first-ever female police chief or sheriff in the Florida Keys.

"You make history on a couple of points, but that has nothing to do with it, because this is all on merit," said Mayor Freddie Foster as Buxton was sworn in by her former Monroe County Sheriff's Office supervisor, Derek Paul. "It's on your character, what you bring to the city and how you manage the officers, and it's good to see you being promoted."

Buxton's law enforcement career began with MCSO in 2015, working as a road patrol officer under sergeant Joel Slough.

"I was brand new, and (Joel) taught me everything I know," she told the Weekly. "He guided me and molded me into who I am today."

Moving over to Key Colony Beach in January of 2019 to better accommodate her family, including her son Mason and daughter Haley, Buxton's career took off, earning the rank of sergeant in December 2023. Working in a city with fewer than 800 full-time residents, she said, gave her the time to know each local and business on a personal level.

"I'll drive around every morning, and I know if something's out of place, because I just know everybody," she said.

It's a habit she said she learned from DiGiovanni, who she said spent as much time checking in on residents and businesses as he did looking out for his own family of officers.

"He knows all the residents, knows what's going on and checks on them to make sure they're okay. This community is so sad to see him go,"



A pair of Key Colony Beach police chiefs: retiring Kris DiGiovanni, left, and incoming Jamie Buxton.

she said. "But he also cared very much about the officers, our well-being and what was best for us. He put us first."

The level of care doesn't go unnoticed by the tiny city's locals, she said.

"A lady saw me at Circle K and said, 'Here, I want to give this to you,'" she said, taking out a now-framed handkerchief embroidered with a blue ribbon and the words "Keep me safe ... Psalm 16:1."

"Within each stitch we have enfolded a prayer for comfort, encouragement, love and care," an attached note reads.

"The support of law enforcement that this community has — they love us, they appreciate us and they support us fully," she said. "We have residents bake cookies and cupcakes for us all the time."

Officers return the favor, hosting monthly cookouts and community events in Sunset Park and getting involved in — well, just about any event they're asked to do.

"The community expects them monthly, and they look forward to

them," Buxton said. "We'll stop people as they're walking the streets and tell them, 'Hey, come join us today.' They think it's the greatest thing ever."

Seeing Buxton's willingness to dive into anything thrown her way, rather than a chase for a rank, was a major reason for her rise through the department, according to DiGiovanni and Foster.

"Jamie has her skills, but the one thing about her is that she wasn't searching for that title," DiGiovanni told the Weekly. "The way she's always showing up, caring about people, working with whatever she had to help people out — that showed me how much she loved the city. I know she has to be proud of (the title), but she's not going to throw that around."

"Jamie was always like the 'invisible chief' — things just got done," Foster told the Weekly. "I was impressed with the amount of work she did without advertisement. She didn't need to try and sell herself — it was with her actions. She handles the position with finesse, with integrity and the insight and forward thinking that we need for the city."

And while Buxton said she doesn't want to "pull the girl card" in a stereotypically male-dominated profession, she takes pride in breaking barriers in the Florida Keys.

"It's weird, and it still hasn't sunk in," she said of hearing herself called "chief" for the first time. "But it's nice that the younger generation can see that if you want something, you work hard and you can get there."

DiGiovanni looks back on 21 years

By her own admission, Buxton will step into massive shoes, left by a chief who gave more than two decades in service to the Gem of the Florida Keys.

When DiGiovanni landed a career in KCB law enforcement following stints as a Hawks Cay security guard, a protective investigator with the Department of Children and Families, and corrections and transportation roles with MCSO, it was 2005. Officers carried their own guns, and shared a total of two cars. But the small city reminded him of the family-first town of Chelmsford, Massachusetts where he grew up. That atmosphere, he said, is what tied him to the city for 21 years.

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The Key Colony Beach City Commission presents retiring Police Chief Kris DiGiovanni with a recognition of his service and retirement gift. From left: commissioner Tom DiFransico, DiGiovanni, Mayor Freddie Foster and Secretary/Treasurer Tom Harding.

“(In Chelmsford) you could go up and talk to the officers; the officers cared for the community, and it was a family,” he said. Former KCB commissioner Ron Sutton treated the entire city as family, he told the Weekly, as does current Mayor Freddie Foster.

In a city where everything is within walking distance, he carried that mentality forward, frequenting businesses and condo complexes simply to check in.

“Even if it’s just to say hello,” he said. “They know you, they trust you and you get that small-town community feeling.”

Six years after he was hired, he took over for retiring Chief Robert Petrick, chasing strides that he knew would help the department recruit and keep its staff — all while keeping his work with the city’s annual Kids Fishing Derby going and stepping in when needed to fill a shift.

“We were able to get our first guns on grants, and after that we would just purchase them — that was a pretty big thing for me. And I was able to get officers to have take-home cars,” he said. “(And) a lot of times I was still working the schedules if we were down a person, because if not, we’re hiring out, and that’s a cost. I’d try to save as much as I could for the city.”

When Hurricane Irma hit in 2017, he rode out the storm with fellow officer Charles Griffith, an ex-Florida Highway Patrol trooper and Afghanistan veteran who he often leaned on for advice, despite the latter being hired long after the chief himself.

Driving around the city to announce the hurricane’s imminent arrival, the pair counted around 100 residents hunkered down.

When the winds died out, that count was still 100.

“We were in this house (on 10th Street), the storm was coming, and the ground was tan and gray — it was a big mess,” he said. “When the storm left, it was like the Wizard of Oz — it went from black and white to color, and it was like ‘Oh, it’s green again. We’re going to be okay.’”

Asked for the biggest moments of pride in his career, he endlessly deflected praise to his staff and commission, heaping praise on Buxton as well as sergeant John Buckwalter and Foster for developing the KCBPD’s Sunset Park cookouts. The officers themselves, he said, are his greatest achievement.

“I’m proud to have a good crew,” he said. “Good, bad or ugly, it’s family. I know I could call anybody right now, and they wouldn’t ask if they’re getting paid or on the clock — they just want to help out.”

If there’s a legacy to be left, he said, “I would like to be known that I cared for the people of Key Colony Beach.”

“Kris was visible, accessible and always available to anybody,” Foster told the Weekly. “He understood the city, he had the pulse of it. He was always looking for ways to win people over versus force it on them with a ticket.”

But as every staff member who entered the office during the Keys Weekly’s interviews confirmed, they knew their boss always had their back, too.

“If it’s something for the officers, I fight as hard as I can to get that for them,” DiGiovanni said. “When it comes to me, I just say ‘okay, well, that’s how it is.’ As long as my officers are okay, it doesn’t matter.”