

Gnome Surf awarded grant from Doug Flutie

Fall River Herald News

FALL RIVER — Call it an early Christmas present or a belated birthday present. Either way, The Doug Flutie Jr. Foundation For Autism delivered a great gift to Gnome Surf founder Chris Antao last week.

Two days after Antao's birthday, Doug Flutie Sr. announced that Gnome Surf — based in Little Compton — would be one of The Doug Flutie Jr. Foundation For Autism grant recipients. The retired NFL quarterback made the announcement on Dec. 16 during a Zoom version of the Flutie Family Holiday Spectacular.

In announcing the foundation's grant to Gnome Surf, a surf camp for kids of all abilities, Flutie, a football star at Boston College as well as in the NFL and the Canadian Football League, also professed his own love of surfing saying, "I just got off the waves; anything surfing I love."

And next summer, Flutie will be joining the athletes of Gnome Surf to spend a day catching the waves at the surf camp in Little Compton, added Antao.

Flutie started the foundation after his own son, Dougie Jr. was diagnosed at age 3 with childhood disintegrative disorder (CDD), a rare autism spectrum disorder. The foundation's mission is to "help people and families affected by autism live life to the fullest."

Getting a grant from that foundation, and the extra nods from Flutie himself, is a major step that will help accelerate Antao's own mission to help families with kids on the autism spectrum, as well as others, through the benefits of the surf therapy that Gnome Surf provides. Though he doesn't know the exact amount

of the grant yet, Antao said the minimum it could be is \$7,500.

"The Doug Flutie Jr. Foundation is a major national foundation for autism so it's more being recognized by those types of foundations that really excites me because this is the major first one to go our way,"

See GRANT, B2

said Antao. "And the fact that Doug wants to come surfing this summer with us is going to do a lot for our program in terms of public relations and getting our name out there further so we can help more kids."

They don't have a date yet for Flutie to visit the surf camp this summer, said Antao.

"I'm just excited because I really believe this will be the first domino to fall in our growth in just getting other foundations and corporate sponsors to come on board with us," said Antao. "The Doug Flutie Jr. Foundation for Autism is a difficult grant to get because it is so competitive and because it's national."

Antao said he couldn't stop crying when it was announced during the Holiday Spectacular event as it brought into focus all the work he and the surf camp beach volunteers have done to bring Gnome Surf as far as they have already.

"I feel blessed to be the person chosen to lead for all these athletes," he said.

Gnome Surf's base for the surf therapy camp is in Little Compton. As he headed into the summer last year, Antao said he had no idea what to

expect. But, after losing a month of the season due to COVID-19 restrictions, they were finally able to start up. Within a week of making the announcement that they were open with strict protocols in place, the surf camp was sold out so Antao hired three additional surf instructors.

"We did over 800 sessions in the water in New England; which would be a pretty good year for a California surf school never mind one on the East Coast where people say, 'You have waves there?' It was amazing; our school grew from 650 /700 families to roughly 1,200," said Antao.

In addition to Little Compton, he said they got approval to hold surf camps next summer in Westport and Newport/Middletown, R.I. so they will be expanding to those locations, contingent on COVID-19 mandates. Additionally, he said he's had people reach out to him to do a surf camp in South Carolina where he's considering starting the season next year.

Gnome Surf's campers come from Massachusetts and Rhode Island as well as Vermont, New York, Connecticut, New Hampshire and Pennsylvania.

Antao said he has been honing the nonprofit's business processes through participation in the Rhode Island-based Social Enterprise Greenhouse, an accelerator program for social entrepreneurs and enterprises. In addition to working full-time, Antao said he's been working 60 hours a week on Gnome Surf-related enterprises that have



positioned the organization to grow into a full-fledged brand.

“People are recognizing our brand as a brand that stands for kindness, for love, for acceptance, inclusion, diversity and they’re purchasing our apparel and wearing it,”

said Antao. “It’s another arm for us that helps to generate revenue. ... It’s not just our athletes, it’s other people who recognize what we do and wear our brand, a symbol to let other people know what they stand for, too.”



Doug Flutie, the NBC Sports analyst and former NCAA, NFL and CFL star, announced earlier this month that Gnome Surf would be the recipient of a grant from the Doug Flutie Jr. Foundation for Autism. [USA TODAY SPORTS, FILE / MATT CASHORE]



A Gnome Surf athlete catches a wave. [SUBMITTED PHOTO]