

Bob Pizzano, LFI '11 – Building a Spraypark with Love



The sprayground opened with much fanfare and rave reviews.

There are many sides to Bob Pizzano—LFI graduate of 2011; owner of a construction business, Pizzano Contractors; husband to Paola and father to eight kids. But it may be his involvement with the Joey Pizzano Memorial Fund (JPMF) that has made him one of the most well-known and respected individuals throughout the Fairfax County Park Authority, Park Foundation and Neighborhood and Community Services (formerly Community Recreation Services) Department.

The JPMF was established by the Pizzano family after a drowning accident claimed the life of their water-loving son and brother, Joey. What followed from that tragedy is nothing short of inspirational, as the non-profit organization, dedicated to improving the lives of children with disabilities and their families, has had enormous impact for thousands of local children, their siblings, and their parents.

First came JPMF Splash, a water safety education class designed specifically for children with special needs. Since its establishment in 1998, more than 5,000 kids have received one-on-one water safety classes that aim to teach five simple safety rules through water play and games.

Next came the inspiration for an even bigger dream—an accessible-to-all sprayground.

“The idea for the sprayground started a number of years ago,” Bob said, “when we noticed that the JPMF Splash program was doing far more than teaching kids about water safety—it was also giving families the opportunity to play together, doing things they may not have thought to do before. We’ve developed a moniker over the years, ‘Special Kids, Special

Families,’ in which we try to foster activities that families can do together and that make life a little easier, a little more fun. Having children with special needs can be very trying; there is the financial side of it, but also the sheer level of time and attention needed by special needs kids can make other siblings feel left out. It can put an incredible strain on relationships, and we wanted to create an accessible place where families could really play and enjoy each other.”

“We started out thinking of a relatively small sprayground,” Pizzano said, “but as things went on, we realized we couldn’t do anything small!”

With an already solid public-private partnership in place with Fairfax County through the JPFM Splash program, the next step was outreach and fundraising, which unfortunately coincided with the start of the global recession in 2008. Yet in spite of that timing, fundraising was soon added to Bob’s to-do list. A \$250,000 grant from The Virginia Board for People with Disabilities was the largest single source of funding, but hundreds of thousands more was funded largely through small fundraisers tied to the JPMF.

“We received a lot of small donations—sometimes just \$20—from a huge group of people who believed in our cause and gave what they could,” said Bob. “We also realized that the park should ideally be operated by the Park Authority for free. The families it was being built to serve are already so strained, I never wanted to hear that a family couldn’t go because they just couldn’t afford the entrance fee. And thanks to the work of Lee District Supervisor Jeff McKay, Fairfax County Executive Tony Griffin, and dedicated staff from the Park Foundation and Park Authority Boards, they figured out a creative way to make that dream a reality.”

Construction on the \$1 million, 7,000-square-foot, zero-water-depth sprayground began in October 2010, with the park opening on May 21 at Lee District Park in Franconia. Named “Our Special Harbor,” it features a Chesapeake Bay theme with a water maze, water benches, dumping buckets, water cannons and 25,000 gallons of water guaranteed to drench.

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Bobbi Longworth, LFI '03, Executive Director for the Fairfax County Park Foundation, says that the Pizzano’s ability to present an in-kind, turnkey operation is truly significant. “The sprayground has spurred the entire recreation area, including a treehouse, to become fully accessible, and it provides a whole new level of services to a previously under-served area of the County. It will have a great, positive impact on that section of Fairfax. The Foundation is raising funds to add even more features to the park, including Chessie’s BIG Backyard, an accessible playground.”

In the midst of this year of creation, Bob also found himself enrolled in LFI, setting out on a journey that he admits made his year exponentially more trying, but that was one of the most rewarding experiences he’s ever had.

“Going through LFI opened my eyes to a whole new world and a whole new approach to getting things done from a business standpoint,” he said. “It also introduced me to some of the most incredible people I’ve met in my life, and showed me firsthand how many people are doing so much for our community. I had no idea of the sheer good that’s happening ... it just blew me away.”

So says the man who has done incalculable good of his own for countless families in Fairfax County and beyond.

For more information on Our Special Harbor, or to donate to the Joey Pizzano Memorial Fund, visit www.jpmpf.org and www.fairfaxcounty.gov/parks/rec/leerec.htm.