

THE

FAIRFAX

# Journal

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## Swim program is Joey's legacy

### Volunteers needed to work with children with disabilities

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When his son Joey died in a drowning accident two years ago, Bob Pizzano had to consider what to include in an obituary, like where family and friends could make memorial donations.

The Pizzano family soon decided to create a foundation in the 6-year-old's name. It would be a living tribute to Joey, described by loved ones as having a warm smile and never letting his devel-

opmental disabilities prevent him from enjoying life.

With a generous response from relatives and friends, the non-profit foundation grew and the family searched for a program where the money could be used, Paola Pizzano said.

"We definitely wanted to do something to help special-needs children, especially to foster an enjoyment of the water," she said. "Joey was always exposed to the water and loved it. When

you see that smile [in a photograph] you don't want to end on a sad note."

The Fairfax County Department of Community and Recreation Services proved to be a perfect match. The division of Therapeutic Recreation Services already offered a five-hour, activity-filled program for county children with developmental problems, such as mild retardation and autism, every Saturday.

So the Pizzanos suggested the

program add a swimming portion to the Leisure Program, held in six-week sessions from 11 a.m. to 4 p.m. on Saturdays.

"There was so many reasons why this made so much sense," Bob Pizzano said. "There was a need and kids really want to be there."

His wife agreed: "If you don't expose them to new things, you won't know what they like."

Please see SWIM, A8

## Swimming program is a living tribute to Joey

### SWIM from A1

The Pizzanos pay transportation costs to the pool and Fairfax County Park Authority fees for those enrolled.

Evan Braff, supervisor at the county therapeutic division, said it was a great idea.

"We're always looking to expand the program and make it better," Braff said.

The entire program is designed to teach children self-sufficiency and independence, as well as socializing skills, he said. "Swimming really clicked with it."

Each week, two groups of 13 children, ages 6 to 17, learn about water safety and aquatic skills for an hour. Groups alternate between watching an American Red Cross video on water emergencies and spending time in the pool.

Children learn how to be safe on the pool deck, how to climb in and out of the pool and how to ask for an adult or lifeguard when they need help, said Jean Skinner, adaptive aquatics coordinator.

Yet, the program cannot thrive without volunteers, she said. "They are the heart of it. One-on-one attention is a key element."

The program is looking for anyone in the region willing to devote time on Saturdays, stand in a pool and have fun with children, Skinner said.

As an incentive, the Joey Pizzano Memorial Fund will pay lifeguard certification costs for volunteers.

Last summer's lifeguard shortage gave them the idea, Paola Pizzano said. "We're trying to make it worth their while."

But volunteers get much more besides an \$80-to-\$200 lifeguard

certification, program officials said.

"It's great for teens who want to work with people that have disabilities," Braff said. "It can lead to other opportunities."

It also teaches teens without disabilities sensitivity awareness.

"There are differences, but there are so many similarities," Paola Pizzano said. "When you spend time with a child and see the joy of them accomplishing something, the differences melt away."

High school students and adults in the Northern Virginia area interested in volunteering on Saturdays can call (703) 324-5587. Volunteers can work an hour each Saturday, one day, or for the program's duration. The current session ends Dec. 16 and a new one starts in January.

