

David Lockstead

Building a Legacy: the Mel Jr. and Marty Zajac Foundation

It started with a golf tournament. The Zajac Golf Classic began raising funds for special needs children in the 1960s, supporting causes like BC Children's Hospital and Variety Club, of which Mel Zajac Sr. was formerly the director and is still a member.

Although the tournament was successfully raising funds for these charities, it was not creating a long-term sustainable legacy. After the tragic deaths of their two sons in sporting accidents a mere seven months apart in 1986–87, Mel Sr., along with his wife Irene, felt inspired to formalize and expand their efforts in honour of their boys.

So in 1987 with an initial influx of \$100,000 of the family's money, the Mel Jr. and Marty Zajac Foundation began as a way of carrying on the Zajac name. At the time, Mel Sr. was managing the Pacific Palisades Hotel and so had access to a number of the hotel's resources. With overhead costs kept low and the ongoing golf tournament already established, they were able to grow the foundation's base quickly.

When asked about creating a new foundation, current President Carmen Zajac replied that in addition to speaking with a lawyer to cover all the legal requirements, the biggest necessity is having a clearly defined goal and the desire to see it through. But forming a foundation is only one way to create a legacy for a loved one. Naming anything

from a building to a park bench, establishing an educational scholarship, or contributing to the creation of green space or a recreational facility are all common ways to carry on the memory.

The year 1989 marked the first project over and above the golf tournament for the foundation: the Sandcastle Preschool in Mission. Due to the generous support of the local community, the \$750,000 project required less than half that amount be raised. What started with 20 children has grown to now 100 typical and special needs kids.

Since then the foundation lists numerous accomplishments, notably the following.

- Capital grant of \$800,000 for The BC Centre for Ability, first called the

Vancouver Neurological Centre, which helps over 800 people with neurological disorders

- \$70,000 donated for advanced technological equipment in the Colin's Smile Society's efforts to help children fight leukemia
- An endowment fund for the United Way

The Zajac Foundation later decided to begin including the needs of seniors, after a visit to an extended care home that included a daycare facility. Simple shared activities between the children and the seniors, like reading and crafts, were helping provide seniors with a sense of value. The kids' curiosity and energy helped the emotional and social needs of the seniors.



Mel Zajac Jr.



Marty Zajac

In turn, under the seniors' guidance and companionship, the children grew in these same areas as they developed awareness of the rights and needs of others. This kind of interaction was compensating for the often limited opportunities for children to interact with their grandparents.

One of two recently completed projects is Zajac Norgate House, a North Vancouver complex that focuses on providing seniors with independence through support programs and adaptable suites. As part of the foundation's goal of inter-generational awareness, residents regularly interact with children from a nearby preschool.

Now an even larger undertaking has begun: the Zajac Ranch. To be built in Mission BC, the Zajac Ranch will provide a chance for seniors and children with special needs to spend time in the beautiful woodsy setting next to Stave Lake. Currently in place are dormitories, a commercial kitchen and dining hall, greenhouses, a sports field, and an animal sanctuary. Besides upgrading the current facilities, once open the ranch will provide therapeutic and recreational programs for children's camps and a bereavement centre.

The goals of the Zajac Foundation include the construction of more seniors housing units and the continued expansion of the Zajac Ranch. But the most important accomplishment for the Zajac Foundation would be to make their foundation a self-sustaining one that could fund community projects every year in perpetuity, without the need to rely on donations, as they do now.

Considering all they have achieved so far, there appears little doubt that the Zajac family will successfully create a legacy in the boys' names that will stand for many years. ▲

Dave Lockstead attended the University of Victoria, earning a Bachelors degree in Economics. He currently works at Coca-Cola Enterprises as a financial analyst.