



# Carmen Zajac: Tragedy and Triumph

**M**el Zajac and his family are well known in Vancouver's business community for building and managing the Pacific Palisades Hotel in Vancouver.

All five Zajac offspring were full of zest for life and the people around them. Corinne, Carmen, Karen, Mel Jr., and Marty strived for success in their education, careers, and relationships.



*Carmen speaks at numerous conferences and meetings, spreading awareness and gaining support.*

Carmen worked at the Pacific Palisades from 1973 to 1982 and later in real estate in Arizona.

In July 1986, the Zajac family was struck a painful blow. Mel Jr. died in a kayaking accident. Carmen returned to her family and the hotel business to work as Assistant Manager of the hotel.

**While the family was still grieving the loss of Mel Jr., the unthinkable happened.**

While the family was still grieving the loss of Mel Jr., the unthinkable happened. Eight months later, in March of 1987, Marty died in a heli-skiing accident.

Amidst their overwhelming feelings of grief, Mel Zajac and his wife Irene (now deceased) decided to create something positive out of the loss of their two sons. They created the Mel Jr. and Marty Zajac Foundation. Mel is Chairman of the organization and Carmen is President.

The focus of the Foundation has been on raising money for seniors and special needs children in BC. The Foundation maintains excellent fiscal responsibility, ensuring administrative costs remain minimal at approximately 8 percent of total costs.

Although the deaths of Mel Jr. and Marty remain a significant loss, the

Zajac family has turned a tragedy into a exceptional gift to special needs children across the province.

They have recently opened the Zajac Ranch for Children, a specially designed Summer camp facility safely providing camping experiences to children with chronic illnesses and/or disabilities. Located on the shores of Stave Lake, Mission, BC, it is a place where children can meet other campers with the same disease or illness and build friendships, self-esteem, and confidence.

Carmen's determination and ambition account for the current success of the Ranch, the only special needs camp in BC to open its doors to all volunteer and health organizations and agencies from across the province. Fully operational medical facilities—capable of providing complex medical treatments such as dialysis and chemotherapy—make the camp experience a reality that special needs children otherwise would not have.



*Smiles and safety help children feel comfortable and gain independence while away from home.*



*Children's faces light up when they ride a horse for the first time in the Ranch's riding program.*

"This project has been a labour of love for our family," Carmen says. "I share my dad's vision and understand the legacy he wants to create in memory of my brothers for the province and perhaps across Canada. I want to see that dream and vision achieved."

A lot has happened at the Zajac Ranch since its opening. In the past year, a wheelchair accessible amphitheatre, stage, and fire pit have been built to fully integrate wheelchair-bound children with their peers. An authentic tipi village constructed for overnight camping experiences is a favourite of the campers. New paddocks were built to house the horses used for the riding therapy program and a covered gymnasium allows programs to run year-round.

Carmen Zajac and her family have been busy behind the scenes. Carmen oversees the business operations at the Foundation headquarters. "The majority of my time is spent reaching out to the community in developing relationships to increase our fundraising efforts," says Carmen. The list of donors—both corporate and individual—is impressive and volunteers have provided thousands of hours of their time.

By building public awareness, Carmen has increased the number of children attending camp. "Last year, a camp for kids



*Water adventures such as swimming, kayaking, and canoeing let campers develop athletic skills some have only dreamed of.*

with kidney disease and epilepsy totalled 11 children. This year the group is 49 strong. We will continue to create awareness and funding to support these children."

**If Zajac Ranch did not exist, these children would grow up never knowing what a camp experience is.**

A lot of her time goes to connecting with families dealing with a child—or sometimes multiple children—with medical challenges. "I want to give children a part of their childhood back," she explains. "There is nothing like seeing the smiles on children's faces or the excitement they feel when they've had a week at camp for the very first time. My dream for the ZR would be that no child be left behind. Sounds cliché, but we feel that every child



*Camp programs are designed for children of all mobilities and abilities.*

that wants to go to camp should go to camp—despite the challenges he or she may face."

"If Zajac Ranch did not exist, these children would grow up never knowing what a camp experience is. I want to see this dream and vision achieved, despite the challenges we may face throughout the journey." ▲

**The Zajac Ranch for Children has received over \$4.5 million in donations and \$500,000 of in-kind donations. They still need \$5.5 million to finish the second and third phases.**

[www.zajac.com](http://www.zajac.com)



*The friendships and experiences kids gain from the Zajac Ranch can last a lifetime.*