

Conversation
with
Michael Passata

at
1547 Harbor Oaks Road
Jacksonville, Florida



Recorded and Transcribed
by
Lyn Corley

TAPE 1 SIDE A

LYN-Today is November 20th and we are at the home of Lyn Corley on Harbor Oaks and I have the great honor to have Mike Cassata here today. Mike and I met in February of 2017 at the Planning Department in the Preservation section of the City of Jacksonville. Joel McEachin asked me to meet with Mike, and I did, and it began a journey of the “Conversations from Cecil Field”. Today Mike is going to tell us his life. I’m going to let him start about when he was born and his childhood and then later on we want to talk about a vision that he had and has been birthed and is going forward. So, welcome Mike.

MIKE-Michael Cassata. I was born in [REDACTED] on [REDACTED]. My mom and dad are Anthony and Lori Cassata. We moved up here when I believe I was three so 1983. Dad joined the Navy and was stationed here at NAS JAX. I grew up on the base, lived there for many years all the way up into my teenage years.

Throughout those years I played baseball, that was my passion when I was young. I had to be a part of something, which was good. It taught me some pretty good skills, team-work and being able to achieve and accomplish goals. I was home-schooled and as a result of that I actually was one of the first home-schoolers to play baseball in Duval County Public Schools. I played baseball at Forrest High School, Nathan Bedford Forrest. I was very successful there. I did win the All-Gateway Conference my final year, my senior year. I won many awards. I had a couple scholarship opportunities but I actually turned them down, I was done with baseball.

I graduated in '99 and I was just burned out. I played many years and many traveling teams so it was time to hang it up.

LYN-How do you graduate from home school? Do you have a ceremony? Did you graduate with another school? How did you do that?

MIKE-We just got our degree. I don't remember there ever being a ceremony. That's probably one thing I kind of missed out on. But I did go to college. I took a couple years off and started at Florida State, or at the time Florida Community College at Jacksonville. Then they transferred over to Florida State College of Jacksonville and I got my A.A. from there and went to UNF for a little bit.

LYN-What degree from FSCJ?

MIKE-Actually I started out the aviation side at Cecil Field when it was decommissioned FSCJ had a pretty strong prominence there, started a pilot program, air traffic control, and they had an AMP program. I chose the pilot and went through all the ground school but then when it came time to do the actual flight training I got a little nervous. There was about forty thousand dollars I would have to have to my name. At the time, it was right as the pilots were all returning from Iraq after 9-11 so I was weighing the options and thinking, “OK, all these pilots are coming back. The possibility of getting a job would be very slim.”

LYN-They flooded the market.

MIKE-Flooded it. So, I decided, "OK, let's shift it over to air traffic control then." So, I did that for a little bit and when I started getting into that training I realized "I'm not a sit behind a desk in a dark room, looking at a scope type individual." So, I went back to just get my general A.A. so that's how that came about.

I ended up using that to go to UNF. That really didn't work out because I was working full time and taking night courses at UNF was pretty rough. The amount of professors that were there, they weren't really that great. They're adjunct professors so I went back to FSCJ and I ended up getting my Supervision in Management Bachelor's Degree from them.

LYN-Which campus did you attend?

MIKE-All of them.

LYN-All of them. You had to go around to find the classes you needed.

MIKE-Deerwood, South. Actually, I did my math at South campus. I found a teacher there that I took most of my math courses from. I was at Kent campus and Deerwood as well. Probably half of it was on-line courses.

LYN-So, what we are saying is that in Jacksonville, Florida there are a lot of educational opportunities. We do have multiple campuses of FSCJ. We have the University of North Florida. We have Jacksonville University.

You mentioned that you were working. What have you been doing?

MIKE-Well, I actually started with an AC company here in town, a local mom and pop company. I started actually working on AC units. I realized, "OK, this isn't me either." (LAUGH) I'm not a mechanical-type person so refrigeration was interesting but it just wasn't something that was my expertise. So, I shifted over to the electrical side which to me made perfect sense, my understanding of electrical, the basics of it.

From that I was actually brought into the actual office and I ran getting parts and supplies for the guys out in the field and through that my connections, I had contacts with the manufactures which was Carrier, Trane, Lenox, etc. so I got real close to the folks at Trane and so it just kind of worked out where they offered a job to me.

I went there and I spent almost twelve years with them working. I started out in the warehouse and worked my way up to the counter on the parts side to the residential side. I worked my way up to sales and then from there my last few years I worked the commercial side in project management. I had kind of a pretty broad opportunity that I got working there. I did that for almost twelve years and they left me, I didn't leave them.

LYN-So, at some point, I'm not sure what year it was, you found a reason to go out to Cecil and clean up the memorial that you had found in disrepair. Can you just start from that point? How did you happen to notice it or were you are Cecil often? How did you know about it and how did that happen?

MIKE-Well, my wife and I bought a house out at Bent Creek so we are real close to Cecil. I was very familiar with it because my dad was stationed out there and when, what I would do a lot was I found myself going out there and just kind of driving around, sitting, thinking. It was very quiet, not from what I remembered it used to be, real loud and a lot of activity going on. So, my interest was always there but leading up to, it was 2014 when I was, November 2014 I was let go from my job. I got to where at that time I spent a lot of time with my kids so we would go up there and ride bikes. You know after five o'clock it was real dead, not a lot of activity so we pretty much had the whole area to ourselves it seemed like.

I remember as a kid we would pick take dad to his hangar, we only had one vehicle growing up. So, we lived on JAX so if we wanted the car we had to take Dad to work.

LYN-Which is a long way.

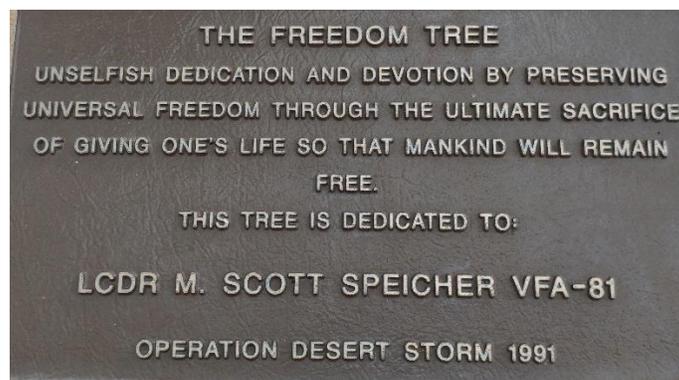
MIKE-Yeah, at the time it must have been two hours round trip. But I remember going down the main drag which used to be D Avenue and we would go right along the chapel. I remember at the corner, right at the road there was this metal display of air craft that would always sit there. I'm probably ten or eleven, twelve at the time but years later I remembered that and so I went back to the sight with my kids riding bikes. That's when I realized, "Oh, there's a memorial here." I did not know.



LYN-You didn't know it was a memorial?



MIKE-No idea. So, we started walking and started to figure out the lay of the land there but there were pilots, a good bit of them lined up on one side then there were two by themselves on the other side. The only name I recognized was Scott Speicher. I remember that because there was, he was on my dad's ship, the Saratoga. So, growing up when he was shot down and presumed dead then they came back and they found his aircraft then they changed his status we always kind of kept up with that story.



LYN-As most people in Jacksonville did. He became the icon of those missing during the war, for Jacksonville.

MIKE-Right. So, then kind of led me from one thing to another trying to figure out the landscape here. But, the thing I didn't like most and played to my heart was the condition of it. It had been forgotten. I actually wanted to go home, get my rake, and start cleaning the place up. That is what we ended up doing later, several weeks later. But, with that interest, I know God puts us in certain places at the right time. When I went there, there was this heavy burden and I know God gave me the vision to do something.

I reached out to the City to try to figure out what is going on with it and who is taking care of it. Long story short, we got in with the City. We actually started out with the Parks Department. They thought it was under their jurisdiction. It wasn't. They were actually issuing PO's to us. We planted some shrubbery and they gave us a couple of PO's to go get them put in and everything. Several weeks after they realized, "Oh, wait. This is not a Jacksonville Parks park per se." It was under the Office of Economic Development.

LYN-I think they do have about a thousand acres under the Parks Department. But that portion was not theirs.

MIKE-It went under the Office of Economic Development. So, then was, "Wait a second. What is the OED of Jacksonville?" Then when you realize it's like eight thousand acres up for possible development. That's what really struck the spark, I'll say me it was like, "Wait a second, we can't let them develop on this property. This is all sacred and hallowed ground the way we looked at it." So, that's what started the whole lease process. It started with Councilman Carter, it started with him. We actually reached out to Kerri Stewart who was the mayor's chief of staff. She is the one, we invited her out to the site. There was a group of us at this point in time that presented to her on site our plans and ideas.

LYN-Who was in the group at that time?

MIKE-At that point, again I mentioned but I didn't get too far with Councilman Carter at the time, things just were not moving quick enough and fast enough so I reached out to a gentleman by the name Jim Stafford. He was the chairman for what was the "Friends Working to Free Scott Speicher". There was a few of them, they were pretty much disbanded but there was still an organization. They were no longer active would be the right term.

In the group we had Miriam O'Hagan, Mark Reed, and Debbie Isaac. They were the ones that were left so we kind of formed and organized our own group which is Cecil Field POW/MIA Memorial but we reached out to Kerri. So, Kerri came out.

LYN-So, did someone know Kerri?

MIKE-Yes, Jim Stafford knew Kerri. They worked together years prior, I can't remember the name of the company. They worked together so that's how they knew each other. So, she was quick to come out and be very supportive of, to at least listen, and then once she did listen she was very supportive of our efforts. She kind of mapped out what needed to happen.

I can remember during that time we had her out there, I want to mention at the time we were just focused on memorials. I don't know what it was in me but we had her back there in the pavilion

area, I claimed the chapel. I had never been in the chapel at this point. I had only seen it but we had no plans for it. I don't know what it was but I know it was God speaking to me, "Hey, claim that chapel." We did.



During this mapping out process she, we worked it in to where we get the sanctuary. It had become a storage facility for the City and we didn't like the condition of it. The more people we brought out there realized there is a lot of history behind it. So, that's kind of how all that came together at the very beginning.

LYN-So Kerri became your friend and advocate on this. What was the next step?

MIKE-There was a lease coming up with the terms and conditions and agreeable lease between our organization and the City of Jacksonville.

LYN-Now, that's a pretty bold thing.

MIKE-Not an easy process.

LYN-Whose idea was it that you get this lease and go forward? Were you all just working together, you just had the vision together?

MIKE-Yes, just had the vision together. We reached out to Kerri and like I say Kerri mapped out what needed to happen. We wanted control to basically develop into, really the main concern was to protect it and preserve it. That was the main focus to make sure that it did not get developed. So, it started out pretty small, as I said the memorial and we added the chapel. But, then it turned into this what is now the twenty-six-acre lease.

LYN-It is twenty-six acres. I had not pinned that number down.

MIKE-Twenty-six acres but we had to, there was a lot of, how can I say it, there was a lot of things we had to provide the city and vice versa so that was a long process. We were really getting moving and it happened about a year later than it was supposed to but due the hurricane and all the, Hurricane Matthew, that really put a damper on a lot of things. It really pushed us into the next year is what happened.

But, there was a lot of things that had to be worked out for example the electricity, the water, the sewage, who would maintain this or maintain that. But, we came to a good median I think, we met in the middle and it was easy to negotiate that part of it I'll say because the city was already paying for this stuff. "But wait, just give us the opportunity to come in here and do something without putting the burden on a non-profit immediately up front." So, we worked out a five-year deal to where they, everything stayed the same but they are going to give us the opportunity to fund-raise and hit a few benchmarks along the way to create the site.

I do want to back up on the memorial. You know, as I told you there was only one name that I recognized but it was interesting the more we went out there you realized each marker represented a different family. That's the thing that struck me is that you know, "It's not about Scott Speicher, it's not about these individuals but it's about a bunch of them but their families are the ones that are most important."

LYN-I still don't have a list of all of those memorials. I was reading something and researched and it indicated there is a memorial to those Navy men who were lost off Haifa, Israel on the ferry. There were twenty-three I believe. The number may be wrong, there may be more, maybe thirty who were lost. There is a memorial to, did you realize there is a memorial to those? I had never heard that mentioned so I will probably go out there today and take a look at all of those memorials because no one had ever said, "Oh, yeah so and so. Is there one to Fred Wright? Do you know that? You're not sure?"

[There is a memorial to Lt. Commander Fred Wright but I was unable to find a memorial to those men lost on the ferry who were serving on the Saratoga]

We don't know exactly why those, that number is there. We will certainly record those that are there.

[Memorial Markers and Freedom Trees have been dedicated in the names of Cecil Field pilots as listed: *Lt. Commander Randolph Ford, Lt. Carl Wieland, Captain Bruce Nystrom, Lt. Dale Raebel, LCDR James Sullivan, Commander Jim Hall, Lt. Commander Fred Wright, Lt. Commander Michael Hoff, Lt. Commander Denver Key, Lt. Commander John Davis, Lt. Steve Musselman, Lt. Commander Lee Cole, Commander Peter Schoeffel, Ct. Commander Phil Craig, Lt. Robert Dwyer, Lt. Commander M. Scott Speicher*]

MIKE-There are some missing we found out. There is something about the decommissioning of the squadrons at the time. That's why they were never added. We don't look at it that way. They were serving at Cecil Field, they lost their lives, they need to be recognized.

LYN-Then inside the chapel was a plaque of a larger number of men who lost their lives while serving at Cecil Field. That plaque is lost. We have not found it. Is that correct? We are realizing that they there are names missing from that plaque.

MIKE-Yes, Memorial Chimes. [Shipmate Memorial Chimes were added to the organ in the chapel-see list at the end of this conversation]

LYN-So, I'm still saying, "This looks like a great big job." Was somebody coming along side saying, "Oh, yeah, I can provide this or that or are do you just still have the vision and you knew people were going to come along?"

MIKE-I had no idea.

LYN-That's what I wanted to hear. You had no idea. You just knew you could do it.

MIKE-That was a scary time. I mean I had just lost my job and I had just started my masters program and so there is a lot of things going on but in the mean-time I know God has placed that in me to do something about that memorial. So, it did.

Things really turned around, I will say, when we went and met with Ray Moore who is the father of the wall, the memorial there, veteran's wall downtown.

LYN-Veteran's Memorial.

MIKE-He was the inspiration behind that so Jim knew him or heard of him and reached out to him so he came out to the sight and met with us and was very positive and up-lifting because we had a lot a negativity. I'm going to say mostly from the military community saying that "This isn't going to work. This vision is not going to happen and you're not going to be able to get a lease. You're not going to be able to get the chapel. It's not worth coming out here." There was a handful of them you know but it was fine. We kept moving forward.

Ray Moore was kind of the turning point. He invited us to the Rotary Club of North Jax and Jim and I presented to them our vision and what we had. Before you know it, we had two gentlemen that just jumped on board immediately. One is an expert of running permits and knowing people in the City to get things moving. So, he was very inspirational and important to get this lease through the City. Without him it wouldn't, probably wouldn't be where it was.

LYN-Say his name.

MIKE-Doug Register. He is a local contractor here. He's a civil engineer at that but he is very well known in the community and he was the main driver behind getting this thing negotiated too and getting it approved. But, through those contacts and the Rotary contacts it brought in a lot of people. It brought in a lot of in-kind services. Now, I already had Prosser, Prosser an engineering company, they already were on-board providing site plans and design for us. But then Doug was able to bring in a lot of other people, one being Holland and Knight,.

They really stepped in and helped negotiate the lease as well. That came from Buddy Schultz. He's a partner at Holland and Knight and he is real close to Pat Mulvihill who is another Rotarian. It's actually a funny story. Pat was actually broken down downtown in his vehicle. Buddy was out jogging so they connected that way even though they had already known each other. So, he started sharing with Buddy the project and Buddy immediately offered services.

LYN-So, let's go back. You did go do a clean-up. I hear you had your family out there initially and you just cut branches on the trees and cleaned up. You're getting the vision while you're on the ground.

MIKE-We organized and had probably twenty of us out there. I even had some of my softball players that played for me that were in the Navy. I volunteered them to come out. We spent a whole day and cleaned the whole place up. There were trees that were actually touching the ground, the limbs.

LYN-It's odd because in the research I've found that the City of Jacksonville is responsible for that and if they do not continue that then the Coast Guard takes responsibility. Now, we're saying it was part of that plot that could have been developed and totally taken away. So, there was obviously it is still, no one knows who is responsible for what part of this massive land mass of Cecil Field.

The lease was signed and you had another councilman jump on your ordinance and that was Jim Love. So, Doyle Carter and Jim Love sponsored it and just as I knew would happen, that last night of council, all nineteen councilmen asked to be sponsors of that bill. It was a nice night at City Council seeing that. Then we got to see the mayor sign the bill at City Hall.

Since that day, what has happened on your project?

MIKE-A lot of things in the background, a lot of meetings, a lot of people to connect. There are still a lot of things we're still working on. For example, our engineering, getting a site-plan colored so people can actually see it. That is in the works and then we also our marketing

material is probably the biggest thing. So, now we are in fund-raising mode. You know that is pretty much done. We have a web site up, that's moving.

LYN-It's nice, I saw it.

MIKE-A lot of those things in the background are taking place. We are still working on the in-kind. The chapel is the number one priority right now is to get that, I don't really want to use the term refurbished, it's just maintenance inside. You know carpet, flooring, getting that handled, the painting and AC unit. All that is coming together. There has been a lot of things that has hindered us with the past few storms that came, the hurricane that came through here, Irma, and even the other storm Harvey has had an effect. Maria had an impact on us because a lot of the fund-raising that we had, that it looked like we were going to get was all shifted to the hurricane relief instead. That has kind of put a damper on things.

LYN-You and I talked about why we want that chapel and what you want to do with that chapel. You want to not totally restore it but make it usable for what purposes?

MIKE-The chapel is to put it back to a military chapel so that it can be used for services, funerals, weddings, anything military but it can be used but to keep that historic significance that it had in the early sixties all the way up to the late nineties when the base was decommissioned. There is a lot of history there and we are just trying to preserve it and also for it to become a historical landmark-one to protect it then two- I want to make a note, it was on the chopping block for demolition.

LYN-It was. It was condemned, could not be used by humans. You and I would agree, it's a fine-looking building and in fine-looking shape it's just been gutted and not had normal maintenance as it should.

It was also, it was proposed to be moved. I don't know if you realize that. There was a church that wanted it moved to their property. That's a big tall building to move. I found a newspaper article about that and I think it was a Lutheran church who had their eyes on that.

So, it stayed through we know those three chances of it going away and it's still at it's original location. It was built in '63 I believe and it is the most visible sign of Cecil Field. It's the only structure that really gets your eye at Cecil. It could become even a symbol of Cecil Field.

MIKE-It's the centerpiece, the center part of the base. The pilots we hear talk about it, that's what, they would drive by it. Even as a kid, we would drive by it and it was always visible, that unique A-frame shape.

LYN-It's a tall A-frame building right there close to the entrance. There was just really one entrance to the base so everybody went by it both in and out. So, with that lease came some other buildings? Is that correct?

MIKE-Yes, we have what used to be the old movie theater building. It kind of sits across, catty-corner to the chapel. It's a six thousand square foot facility and we are able to use that as a starting point for the museum is what we're doing. That's the most important piece of this project or one of them, that piece of history that was at Cecil but then also it's going to be called

“The POW/MIA Memorial Center” that’s what we’re using it as. It will be the starting point where kids and the general public, students can come and you know interact and learn about the history we have not only here but in those that are still missing in action. It’s a great starting point.

I will tell you, it’s kind of funny, again years on that base and then up to now I never noticed the building, never saw it. It’s like I go out there and I would jog a lot. For some reason I just happened to, even though I jogged by it many times before, something caught my eye. It was like God just slapping me, “Hey, look at this building here.” So, we got that worked into the lease as well. I mean He showed me that vision that this is the starting point and before you know it here it is. We’ve got the lease, we’ve got the building.

LYN-You have an office there.

MIKE-We have two offices.

LYN-You still have twenty-six acres. What else is in that twenty-six acres?

MIKE-Well, this is going to be a destination site. We realized throughout this whole project ...

TAPE 1 SIDE B

MIKE-Throughout this project we realized that in the country there is not a memorial, or a national site for the former Prisoners of War and those Missing in Action. Now, I don’t want it to be confused, there is a National Prisoner of War Museum in Andersonville, Georgia, The National Prisoner of War Museum period. That does not include the Missing in Action.

LYN-That is the site of a Civil War prison, Union prisoners were there so that would be their focus.

MIKE-That is their focus. I have heard that they are up to modern, you know up to Desert Storm or even the second Gulf War. But I have never personally been there but there are people in our organization that have been and so the purpose is former Prisoners of War with Civil War primarily.

We saw it as an opportunity to get the additional acreage to create this site that could be for those that are Missing in Action. There are 83,000 going back to World War II that are still missing. That is what we’re doing with the site. It’s going to be the Washington, D.C. National Mall type scenery and memorial is what that is.

Now, there is a Cecil Field piece that is on there as well. You know, we can’t forget that. Then there is also a site the engineers got in design for the replica of the USS Saratoga (CV-60). It’s a smaller scale but it’s a dock in the shape of the Sara. We think that’s going to be key because that ship’s only home port was here in Jacksonville at Mayport. There are a lot of memories and a lot of men lost their lives off that ship so we think that’s really key to make this a memorial site that’s going to incorporate and a lot of the military focus here.

LYN-You know the last skipper lives here too.

MIKE-Captain Kennedy.

LYN-Captain Kennedy is right proud of that command. He is a pilot but he kept wanting to “drive the boat”. That was his boat.



Final Cruise - USS SARATOGA (CV-60)

Tiger Cruise members included a young man, Michael Cassata, who today works toward memorializing those who served on the Saratoga who became POW's or MIA's from this ship along with those from all branches of U.S. Military

Mike, there is a big debate, Cecil Field is way out there. What is going to bring people to your Memorial? We have discussed that many times and I know you have answers. Talk to us about it.

MIKE-Well, I think it's a prime spot. I think it's the best location in the City of Jacksonville. You know, I've lived here my whole life and the traffic is getting worse and worse. It's horrible. You know, I think with the new First Coast Expressway coming in is key. It will connect, go all

the way down into Clay County. You can easily reach Middleburg, Green Cove Springs, you know down to the Shands Bridge all the way up to I-10 so I want to make note, "Cecil Field is five minutes off of I-10." I-10 sees millions and millions of commuters on an annual basis.

LYN-With a new fabulous road.

MIKE-Right, a brand-new road. So, I believe it could not be in a better spot. You know, this is, it is local but it's not. It's not just something that is a designation site for the state and the nation so, Florida, Jacksonville is where Florida begins, so why not have a spot where all these commuters, millions coming in that will pull a lot of them off the highway. Then, to make note we are just fifteen or twenty minutes off of I-95.

We are in a strategic location so I think with the history and making this a destination site, you know, with the former Prisoners of War and Missing in Action, it's a great, I think it's a gold mine. I think it is sitting there waiting. The road system as I mentioned, I mean it's real easy, it's accessible. I keep comparing where we're at to the National Naval Aviation Museum in Pensacola.

They are about thirty minutes off of I-10. It's a good drive. You've got to go through downtown Pensacola. Now they've just recently re-done where you've got to enter. So, it added an extra ten minutes to it. So, they see almost a million visitors on an annual basis, about eight hundred thousand was the last number I got. So, not taking anything away from them but they are a national Naval aviation center and we're doing something that is going to be a national destination for all branches of the service, it recognizes all of the not just the Navy even though this is a Navy town. But again, a lot people come through here and they go down you know to Orlando or Miami. You know, they have to come through Jacksonville a good bit of them.

LYN-I'll give you a number. Two hundred and fifty thousand cars a day pass through Jacksonville on I-95. We haven't talked about this but in another conversation Councilman Love sees there being a veteran's tourism opportunity if the Adams does come. I don't know if that is a done deal or not. But, he noted connecting different opportunities for veterans. I think that could easily happen for this.

A five-year lease is a short-term lease. What happens when you start this project and that five-year lease is over? What are the conditions on that five-year lease?

MIKE-Well, the City set us up for those five years to fund raise and to finalize our design. Now, when that five years is up what will happen that's in our current lease is, right now we're not having to pay a lot of things. The City, as I mentioned, they were already paying for these things. All we did was request that we come in. give us five years, let us put this together, let us get this moving. After that five years then, there is a couple of things that the organization we will absorb and take on a lot of the cost-maintenance of the grounds, water and electricity, you know just the over-all management of the site. So, we'll have full control over it.

But, after that five years as long as we've met those benchmarks then it will then, I don't know if it will be reviewed, but it will go to a twenty-year long-term lease from there. I say there isn't

going to be reviewed, somebody will have to look at it obviously to make sure we that we hit those benchmarks so...

LYN-I will say that the City of Jacksonville does retain ownership of much of the land that is used there and the organizations or businesses lease the land. The land will always belong to the City of Jacksonville. You will be a leasee.

We just had a fun experience with a school, a local charter school. It's called Foundation Academy and somehow you were in contact with them and they became a little partner and have done some projects. They have project-based learning and they have done some projects and we had an event out there. Talk to us about what went on out on San Pablo Road at the Foundation Academy.

MIKE-What started that whole thing, I'll go back to Rotary, the contact is through Rotary. Pat Multihill again, has a lot of connections. So, he was talking to one of the ladies, Robin Freedman there and they met at some joint event that they had. He was sharing with her what we had going on so she jumped right on it with like, "Wow, based on us being a project-based learning structure that is something we might be interested in getting involved in."

So, they immediately reached out to me. I want to back up, my whole part of this vision is you know youth and kids. I think there is a big disconnect between the military and there is a lot of history that we have just right in our back yard that's not being researched or taught at the school level. So, that was always in the back of mind so when they reached out to us with Pat knowing this he connected the two of us.

So, throughout the course of several months we were trying to figure out what these students could do and you know one was just research, just learning about these individuals and learning about what they did and where they came from and what happened to them. You know, kind of never forget who they are really is what it boiled down to.

So, that's how all that kind of came together. You know we provided them with all the pilots that are out there at the memorial and some in addition to that they were able to research and study so they came together and they did it in art work. They did vignettes. So, there was a lot of things coming together and we had that event on the 13th of October. It really blew us away.



Foundation Academy student-designed models of planes flown at Cecil Field



Foundation Academy Student Art Work

LYN-The drama presentation with the visuals, audio visuals was very impressive.

MIKE-I was blown away. Even I didn't know what to expect when they had this event. I mean those kids, they really put a lot of time and effort into it and I always thought who better to research than the school system than our own local military heroes.

LYN-Many of the students there are military connected, their fathers, their mothers serve. Then we had the famous Andy Ramotik show up and he is included in our Conversations although he did not serve at Cecil. He certainly added inspiration to this time by getting the students involved into his time of being a POW.

Then Dizzy Gillespie did a powerful presentation. The kids were very inspired that day by those veterans who spoke to them. Thank you for caring about the youth and that involvement.

MIKE-I think you know with the military service, the family is the one that is really forgotten. Throughout this whole project what I've realized was you know these individuals, we don't know where a lot of them are or what happened to them. In some cases, the families are the ones that are stuck you know back at home not knowing what to do. That's what I came to realize with the Missing in Action family.

You know, my dad, I remember that separation that took place as a kid. He would go out to sea and my mom she had to become the leader. She had us kids to be her support group but it was that separation, she was missing half of. To see that you know it taught us a lot but I mean the family serves too. The military doesn't look at it that way but...

LYN-They also serve who wait.

MIKE-Exactly. They serve, they are just as important as that service member out. But, I related that to, you know, them not coming home. What would happen if my dad didn't come home? You know that's the thing that a lot of people forget. These families, that's what this site, I hope is going to become is a place of healing for them. That's probably the most important thing is the family.

LYN-You do have involved Pam Cain whose father did not come home and his remains did not come home. She is an advocate for those in Washington and she is going to be a great advocate for this memorial. It was an honor to meet her.

MIKE-Then Primm Wright, her husband was missing in action for eighteen years. Her daughter, Cindy Covington, she was very inspirational for the site design. Cindy is a pretty tough go-getter and I will tell you when we had her in the engineer's office designing the site plan, she opened up to me for the first time and explained the process and how many years it took for her dad. She I believe was ten, ten or eleven, when her dad was shot down. So, she was old enough to understand what was going on so all those years for her to explain how he came back in a box and how they did all that just broke me up to hear that. That's when I realized that's why we're doing this is for the families.

How are we going to never forget those that are still missing but the families, it's a place of healing for them.

LYN-I did interview Primm and she talked to me about escorting the casket back. It was emotional but I didn't quite get the whole thing. There is a movie with Kevin Beacon where he is assigned to escort a military individual back and it goes through every step of how that happens and how it moved the communities that they brought it through. It is a very moving process and I'm going to put the name of the movie on this tape and recommend. ["Bringing Chase"]

Eighteen years is a long time of disconnect and suddenly be there with the remains of a loved one. For Pam there are no remains and she works to make sure remains do continue to come back. As a daughter of someone who was missing, not in the military, but he was missing for a number of weeks it is hard not knowing. Thank you for honoring these people and I hope there will be a way of seeing that there will be people who know that happens who will want to join in that effort because they are still waiting.

So, Mike, tell us what you're looking at in your future. You have your hands full with this but are you looking for another career opportunity perhaps?

MIKE-(Laugh) Yes, I've always had a desire with my dad to serve in the military. Actually, most of my family, my grandfather, both grandfathers and many of my uncles that served as well. I've always looked to serve and you know due to timing and you know my own desire I have not had that opportunity yet but I have tried for the past few years to get a commission with the Navy in the supply, the reserves. So, that is something that is a goal and passion of mine that I am going to make sure I keep trying until the Navy says "I'm either selected or you're too old."

LYN-So, that opportunity would exist right here in Jacksonville. So, you get to stay and serve and no long tours on the ships.

MIKE-There is a possibility you could deploy.

LYN-Who knows what the world is going to be and what the needs are going to be with the military but you have the potential to be here serving and supporting our situation. We wish you well for that Mike. Thank you.

MIKE-Thank you.

SHIPMATE MEMORIAL CHIMES

The Cecil Field Shipmate Memorial Chimes Fund was established in 1963 to provide a permanent memorial to members of the Naval service who lost their lives while on duty at U.S. Naval Station, Cecil Field, Florida. During the succeeding years, contributions to the fund have been made in memory of 28 officers and men whose names appear on the memorial plaque. The new chapel was completed in November 1966 and it has recently been possible to purchase the Schulmerich Magnebell Carillon which is being dedicated today. The Chimes Fund will remain active with future contributions being used to provide additional components to the system.

Dedicated 12 November 1967

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