

Getting Ready for Grom

By Butch Maier Photography by Harry Gerwien
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Developer Bruce Thompson, right, tapped his nephew Jon Thompson, left, to manage the J.T.'s Camp Grom project. Jon is part of the development team at his uncle's company, Gold Key | PHR.

Bruce Thompson chuckled.

"I was trying to duck it," he recalled. "It was just too big of an undertaking."

This from the Gold Key | PHR chief executive officer, who this October was in the middle of – among other gigantic projects – a major renovation of The Cavalier Hotel in Virginia Beach and the construction of The Main hotel in downtown Norfolk.

“Too big of an undertaking” would not seem to be a group of words Thompson would string together.

Hotels, however, have precedents. No matter how large or expensive, he was familiar with the process of putting those together.

This was something new.

JT’s Camp Grom, a first-of-its-kind destination of compassion and support, would be a camp for wounded war heroes, for families of fallen warriors, and for children and adults with special needs.

And it would be named after his son, Josh, who for nine years has battled amyotrophic lateral sclerosis (ALS), also known as Lou Gehrig’s disease.

So no matter how big of an undertaking JT’s Camp Grom was going to be, Thompson said, “if I can find the property, I’ll do it.”

the place to put it

Thompson talked with then-Virginia Beach City Manager Jim Spore, Mayor Will Sessoms and City Councilman John Uhrin.

“They said Virginia Beach wants to be known as a city that’s fully accessible,” Thompson said.

There were two pieces of property available. Thompson chose one that was 70 acres and in a good location, off Prosperity Road.

One problem.

When the state had given the land to the city, it included a deed restriction for property to be used for a golf course.

Thompson called up Gov. Terry McAuliffe and others from the state to see if the deed restriction could be lifted.

Their response? If the city didn't mind, that was fine.

"I was hoping somebody'd say no," Thompson said, laughing. "Before I know it, the General Assembly had agreed to take the deed restriction off and allow us to have the land for \$1 a year.

"So I went, 'I gotta do it.' And here we are."

JT's Camp Grom broke ground in April 2015. Wood and stone were being moved into place this October. Thompson and project manager Jon Thompson – his nephew – expect the camp to be open by late spring or early summer 2017.

the idea behind it

"Grom" and "grommet" are slang terms for a young surfer.

Before ALS took hold of him, Josh Thompson loved to surf. A painting depicting him catching a wave on a board hangs outside a boardroom in the Gold Key | PHR headquarters on the Oceanfront.

For non-surfers, if “grommet” sounds familiar, there’s a reason.

JT’s Grommet Island Park, at Boardwalk and 2nd Street in Virginia Beach, came about because of Josh Thompson as well, back when he was in a wheelchair.

“There was no way for him to go to the beach with his sons,” Bruce Thompson said. “There was no way for them to have a day at the beach. And conversely, the kids with disabilities couldn’t go to the beach with their brothers and sisters.”

What they needed was a 100 percent-accessible Oceanfront park.

“And [Josh] said, ‘Let’s build the first one ever in the United States,’ which is what we did,” Bruce Thompson said.

The park opened in 2010. Two years later, another Josh Thompson idea was set in motion.

Born with a congenital heart defect, aortic stenosis, he had to spend the better part of his first six months at Children’s Hospital of The King’s Daughters in Norfolk.

“When I say we had no money, we had no money,” Bruce Thompson said. “A 6-month-old with congenital heart surgery, and they did it all, and we never got a bill.

“Josh said, ‘Let’s do something to give back to the hospital.’” In 2012, CHKD received the Grombulance, a kid-friendly, mobile, neonatal and pediatric transport unit.

Which brings us to JT's Camp Grom.

Bruce Thompson said when Josh started sleeping with a Wounded Warrior blanket and watching war documentaries, he was inspired to do something for veterans who return to Hampton Roads.

They are brought back into the workforce, but how do they get back to recreation?

So Josh's idea for the camp was that in the winter, during the day, wounded veterans could come in, and at night, children would use the camp. The weekends would be for everyone. In the summer, during the day, children would be there. At night, the veterans.

"That was all kind of his thought," Bruce said.

the money behind it

Bruce Thompson knew he would not be alone in his efforts to create JT's Camp Grom.

There already was support in place as Josh's brother, Chris, and his friends from The Virginia Gentlemen Foundation had helped to raise millions of dollars for ALS research, Grommet Island Park and the Grombulance.

This project's price tag was \$15 million.

"And you know what?" Bruce Thompson said. "With the exception – and I'm not going to tell you who – with the exception of two people, no one that I've asked to help us has

said no. No one. Everybody [else] that I've asked has said, 'How can I help? What can I do?'"

In addition to the city of Virginia Beach, The Virginia Gentlemen Foundation event contributors and Gold Key | PHR & Diamond Resorts International, those who contributed at least \$500,000 each include the Laura & Jerrold Miller Philanthropic Fund of the Tidewater Jewish Foundation, the Mitchum family and the TowneBank Foundation.

Those who have given at least \$250,000 include The Batten Foundation, the Hampton Roads Community Foundation, JRC Mechanical, Sentara Healthcare, the Standing family and Sysco Hampton Roads.

The other six-figure donors were: A&W Site Contractors, BB&T, Brad & Molly Hobbs, Breakthru Beverage Virginia, The Cabell Foundation, Charles Barker Automotive, Curtis Colgate, Interval International, MEB General Contractors, The Mary Morton Parsons Foundation, McLeskey Family Foundation, PRA Group Inc., Paul & Susan Hirschbiel, Preston & Catharine White, Priority Automotive Group, The Reidy Family Foundation, Scott & Teri Rigell, Stephen & BJ Ballard, W.M. Jordan Company Inc. and The Wynne Family Fund of the Hampton Roads Community Foundation.

The 2016 JT Walk & Beach Party – featuring the Grammy Award-winning band Train, thanks to Diamond Resorts – raised \$1.1 million. So at the end of October, the project was only \$400,000 from being fully funded.

“And I've got some doors to knock on for that, that haven't quite come through yet,” Bruce Thompson said. “That will get us to

\$15 million, and we'll be able to build it out.”

the cousins's cause

Jon Thompson, 29, is Josh's younger cousin.

“This really hits home for me,” Jon Thompson said. “I'm very proud to be working on the project.”

He graduated from James Madison University with a degree in finance. As part of the development team at Gold Key | PHR, Jon had been working with project managers on the company's other work when Bruce Thompson took his son's idea and entrusted his nephew to manage the project.

“I said, ‘Look, I want you to do some charity work,’” Bruce Thompson said. “I want you to come out here and work on this project. It's just a little camp,’ you know. Well, what he didn't realize and I didn't realize is he'd have five architectural firms – Clark Nexsen being the master architect over the whole thing – and four different contractors.”

How complicated is this project? Take a look at all the moving parts in the five design/build teams he oversees:

Land and site work – General contractor: A&W Contractors; master architect: Clark Nexsen; civil engineer: WPL; geotech: ECS Mid-Atlantic, McCallum Testing, GET Solutions, SOLitude Lake Management; docks/piers: PreCon Marine; picnic pavilions: MEB General Contractors.

Welcome center – General contractor: Axis Global Enterprises; architect: Work Program Architect; engineer (MEP): Cherwa-

Ewing; engineer (structural): Speight Marshall.

Multipurpose center – General contractor: RD Lambert & Son; architect: Retnauer Baynes Associates; engineer (MEP): PACE Collaborative; engineer (structural): McPherson Design Group; kitchen consultant: Crest Foodservice.

Gymnatorium – General contractor: W.M. Jordan Company; architect: Cooper Carry; engineer (MEP): Hickman Ambrose; engineer (structural): Stroud Pence.

Aquatic center – General contractor: RRMM Design Build; architect: RRMM Design Build; engineer (MEP): Bowman Foster & Associates; engineer (structural): Sinclair Pratt Cameron; pool/splash park: Greenville Pool.

“Then he has to deal with issues like when we cleared the land,” Bruce Thompson said.

Last spring, nearby residents inquired whether trees on the city property were legally cleared. The city issued a zoning violation notice to the Camp Grom developers in April.

When it wasn't the people from Birdneck Lake ruffling feathers, it was birds around the camp's lake.

Gaggles of geese gathered and set up residence beside what was to be one of Camp Grom's main attractions. The lake will feature three fishing piers, cable wakeboarding for beginners and individuals with special needs, and a track surrounding it. A liner had been put in the lake to help ensure the water quality would be good enough for swimming.

Yet, for a while, the geese were – well – poo-pooing these plans.

The lake liner cost \$500,000. The geese solution cost just a few bucks.

While walking the property in October, Bruce Thompson pointed out a coyote. Visitors froze in fear. Then they heard the laughter.

Jon Thompson had the idea to purchase three inexpensive cutouts resembling coyotes or dogs.

“It was trial and error,” he said. “It took a couple times for me to figure out if these were going to work.”

They have – like scarecrows for geese. And Jon Thompson’s uncle raved about the ways the project manager has deftly handled what was pitched to him as “just a little camp” and had turned into a complicated endeavor.

“He has to deal with all that, he has to deal with the neighbors, he has to do all the site work out here, build a lake, all that,” Bruce Thompson said. “It’s not the biggest in dollars, but it’s the biggest single assignment that we have in our office right now.”

Clark Nexsen did the master plan and laid the foundation for all the other designers to come in and build on what it had started.

“In the beginning, as you can imagine, it takes some time to get these teams to come together to do this work pro bono,” Jon Thompson said. “They all wanted to get involved. It was just placing them with the right building and with the right contractor and making sure we had the right teams in place to get everything moving. So Clark Nexsen kind of helped start that

process.”

The contractors are doing work at cost, and all the architects and engineers are doing work pro bono.

“The community’s really coming together to make this thing happen, and it’s really a great effort so far,” Jon Thompson said.

Clark Nexsen, along with WPL, did the layout for each building – the gym, the welcome center, the aquatic center and the activities center.

“The architect and all the engineers – the mechanical engineer, the electrical engineer – all that work on a building – are all donating,” Bruce Thompson said. “And the general contractor is doing all the work at cost, and then the suppliers he’s going to, he’s getting supplies at cost or donated.

“Like Brad Hobbs, the mechanical equipment supplier, he’s donated almost all the mechanical equipment, and JRC, the mechanical/plumbing subcontractor, is doing a quarter of a million dollars worth of mechanical/plumbing work out here for free.”

It takes a village of people and companies to raise a camp.

“We let everybody – the architect, the consultants and a group of the sponsors – get together and design stuff,” Bruce Thompson said. “Because we wanted it to be almost a Habitat for Humanity. When we get close to the end, all the donors are going to come out and rake and paint. And everybody that works on it gets a lifetime membership.”

the Y factor

Bruce Thompson and The Virginia Gentlemen Foundation knew how to raise the money, and they started getting pledges toward the \$15 million goal.

“I went over to TowneBank to fund against the pledges,” the Gold Key | PHR CEO said. “[TowneBank CEO] Bob Aston says to me, ‘TowneBank would be happy to provide the financing for something like this at [the bank’s] cost.’”

The bank had just one, not-so-little question: Who was going to operate the camp?

“And I said, ‘I don’t know. I have no idea,’” Bruce Thompson said. “I know it’s a good idea. My son, Josh, this was his thing, as was everything that we’ve done. Grommet Island [Park] was his inspiration, the Grombulance was his inspiration and this was his inspiration.”

But once the money was raised and the camp built, someone else needed to be in charge.

“The Virginia Gentlemen Foundation is great at helping us raise money and getting engaged and all that, but running the camp, we’re clueless,” Bruce Thompson said. “The camp wouldn’t have happened but for the fact that when we did our needs assessment, which we paid a professional to do, it showed us there were 47,000 wounded veterans in Hampton Roads and about 114,000 kids [with special needs].

“The Y said, ‘Well, there’s a need and there’s a void, so we’ll take it on and operate it.’”

A board of trustees is managing the asset, and the YMCA will be the operator of the camp.

Jon Thompson said, “So we went and talked to the YMCA as well to say, ‘Look, we’re designing these buildings, but you guys are going to be the ones operating them, so what do you need? We don’t run camps, and you guys are the camp guys. So we’re going to design something for you that’s cool and unique, but we also want your input so that when we deliver this building, it’s practical and you guys can use it.’

“We’re not just building it for the sake of building it.”

the input and impact

Camp Grom project representatives also sought out ideas from Wounded Warriors and parents of children with disabilities.

“This is a unique camp,” Jon Thompson said. “We want their input because there are some things that they are going to know that they need that we’re not going to pick up on. We were able to enhance the design to cater to them. Everyone’s kind of put in their two cents.”

For instance, on one side of an activities center will be arts and crafts. On the other side will be a multisensory area for children with Down syndrome and autism, with items they can touch and feel.

Shelters are being designed for a lot of functions – from ways for children with disabilities to stay cool during the summer to cool things to do.

“I think, at the end of the day, we’re going to have a great product,” Jon Thompson said.

There will be obstacle courses and mountain bike trails cut in the woods for Wounded Warriors so they will have what they need to prepare for the Warrior Games.

Bruce Thompson also wants visitors to be prepared for the rest of their lives.

“People wouldn’t think of me as a religious guy,” he said. “But if you have your faith, and you know everything happens for a reason, and you can believe that we are just here for a small amount of time, we are arrogant if we think that we can understand God’s plan.”

He called Steve Kelly, pastor of Wave Church in Virginia Beach, “because I know that he can relate to the kids and young people really well.”

Kelly suggested that he have Wounded Warriors and others give inspirational talks to campers.

“[Kelly] said, ‘You should go all around Hampton Roads and ask who their heroes are,’ Bruce Thompson said. “‘Who are the people that these kids know and respect that have seen adversity?’”

He added, “One of the things that we do when we talk to Josh ...”

Bruce Thompson kept walking but stopped talking.

“It’s hard for me to even have this conversation,” he said.

These days, it’s difficult and painful for Josh Thompson to even be moved around.

When this grand vision of his is realized, when JT’s Camp Grom opens, will he make an appearance?

“That has been an actual assumption,” Bruce Thompson said. “We keep saying, ‘We’re going to open up pretty soon.’ And he never says no. When it gets right down to it, I don’t know. That’s his decision.”

Either way, there will be a celebration on his behalf.

It’s almost time for Grom. –**IL**

JT's Camp Grom Campaign Contributors

\$14.6 million out of \$15 million goal had been raised as of Oct. 26, 2016

\$1 million+

The City of Virginia Beach

The Virginia Gentlemen Foundation Event Contributors

Gold Key | PHR & Diamond Resorts International

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Laura & Jerrold Miller Philanthropic Fund of the Tidewater Jewish

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