

Maureen Riuzzi Adapted Course

Sponsored by the Riuzzi and Russo Families

A young lady who loved to laugh, ride roller coasters and root for her favorite sports teams will be memorialized at a new event celebrating the achievements of adults with disabilities. The Russo and Riuzzi families are sponsoring the Barber Beast on the Bay Adapted Course that will be held on September 7 in memory of their daughter, niece and sister, Maureen Riuzzi.



With their sponsorship, the families honor the young woman who brought them joy and love for 33 years, as well as support the mission of the Barber National Institute in serving children and adults with disabilities.

Although Maureen was born and lived in Dayton, Ohio, her family has strong ties to the Erie area. Maureen's father, Carmen Riuzzi, is still considered one of the greatest basketball players to hail from this region. And her aunt and uncle, Peter and Flo Riuzzi Russo, have been active their entire lives in Erie's athletic and community organizations.

"Coming from Erie, I of course knew about the Barber Center," said Carmen. "Our family agreed that this would be a good way to help a very worthwhile organization that is doing so much to help people with disabilities."

A stand out basketball player at Erie Technical High School, Carmen Riuzzi went on to the University of Dayton in 1953 where he would become a star point guard on teams that twice competed in the national invitational championship finals. While his achievements on

the courts still shine in school record books, it was another event that led to Carmen's most treasured legacy.

In between studies and games, Carmen met a young elementary education major, Ann Fitzgerald. The two married after graduation, settled in Ann's home town of Dayton and went on to have ten children.

The young couple welcomed their second child—and first daughter—on April 28, 1961. Little Maureen weighed only 5 lbs, 2 oz. at birth, and Ann remembers being concerned about her right from the start. "The doctors kept reassuring us that she was fine, but I was still worried," said Ann. "I already had a child at home (a son born a year earlier) and I knew that something was not right."

Maureen started walking at 13 months of age, but seemed to fall a lot. Over time, the falls became more frequent and often resulted in injuries. While she was not able to speak, she learned to communicate well by pointing and gesturing.

Many doctors' visits and tests still did not provide clear answers about the Riuzzis' oldest daughter. She was finally diagnosed with scoliosis, and one pediatrician suspected cerebral palsy.

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As the Riazzi family continued to grow, Maureen would be at the center of it all. She picked up the nickname “Reenie,” and was close to her growing brood of siblings.

“When Reenie was here, all of her siblings made sure she was included in everything,” said Ann. “When their friends came over, they would always greet her...she would just light up.”

Reenie began school in classes for students with special needs and loved everything about it—from riding the bus to meeting other children. But her physical condition continued to deteriorate, and by age 12 she was in a wheelchair.

The Riazzi family was determined that nothing would hold Reenie back.

“We took her with us everywhere we went,” remembers Carmen. Reenie’s favorite outings were to amusement parks, such as their visits to Cedar Point, King’s Island and Disney World. “The boys would lift her in and out of the car, and even onto the rides in the parks.”

After finishing school, Reenie went on to a workshop program, where she loved completing assembly jobs and being with other young adults. But her favorite place was with her family.

“All of her life, Reenie was very social,” said Ann. “She always seemed to be able to understand jokes with her brothers and sisters. And she became a big sports fan and loved watching football and basketball games with her brothers and dad.”

Reenie celebrated as her siblings began to marry and have children of their own. One niece, Abbigail Maureen, was born on her birthday. A day after the family got together to celebrate the shared birthdays, Maureen passed away in her sleep at the age of 33.

Although nearly two decades have gone by since Maureen’s death, her life continues to

be an inspiration for the Riazzis. “She was truly a gift to our family,” said Ann. “Every one of my children is a better person because Maureen was part of our family. They have all become more generous, caring adults, always ready to give to others who need help.”

Reenie’s parents and siblings continue to support the school and workshop that she attended, and want to ensure that others with disabilities feel the kind of love that was shared in their family. Even though several siblings have moved out of town—and the family now includes 22 grandchildren—they all still gather together often for holidays and events.

Reenie’s family has been working with her aunt and uncle in Erie to extend their support to the Barber Beast Adapted Course. The idea that adults with developmental and physical disabilities can conquer an obstacle course challenge—and have a good time—brought to mind memories of Reenie’s indomitable spirit.

The 1.5 mile adapted course will begin and end at Beach 11 at Presque Isle State Park, and feature six obstacles that have been designed by a team of therapists and teachers at the Barber National Institute and adults with disabilities. All participants are welcome to have a “course buddy” accompany them if needed.

Registration is \$25 although the fee is waived for participants who sign up to fundraise for the Barber Foundation; a limited number of scholarships will also be provided by the Russo and Riazzi families. Information and registration is available at:

BarberBeast.org/adaptedcourse



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Valley Forge, Pennsylvania
(800) 873-9203
Success@PlannedGiving.Com

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