

THIS + THAT

Around our town





Dog DAYS

Ryan Schwertfeger's doggedly determined work to ensure the construction of Oakland's first dog park is more than just an incomplete grade-school project.

STORY
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IT ALL STARTED with a dog named Scooby.

Ryan Schwertfeger and his parents, Jill and Dirk, rescued the Golden Retriever mix from an animal shelter in 2008. Jill, a devotee of dog behaviorist Cesar Millan (you may know him as “The Dog Whisperer”), took to heart his advice that dogs need socialization and exercise. So Scooby and family began to make trips to the dog park near the Wild Duck Pond at Saddle River County Park in Ridgewood. Ryan was in the 8th grade at Valley Middle School at the time.

“We had a requirement that in order to graduate, you had to have an 8th-grade project,” Ryan recalls, “and it had to be something you did for the community.”

So Ryan decided to spearhead a drive to establish a dog park in Oakland. He circulated petitions among the businesses in town and collected nearly 700 signatures. He took the petitions before the Borough Council, and suggested that a property now known as Stewart’s Woods—a green space across from the town’s first aid squad headquarters—would be a good location. “I was told that there was a whole backstory to that piece



Ryan with Scooby & Riley.

of property, and a dog park couldn’t go there,” Ryan says. “However, I learned that if I waited a bit, the town was going to buy what is now Great Oak Park—the former site of the Pleasureland swimming complex and Muller’s Park—and we could try and put the dog park there.”

The borough, using a combination of state Green Acres grant money and revenue raised from a municipal open space tax, purchased the property for \$2.2 million in 2010. Pleasureland had been closed since an infamous gun battle between rival New York gangs occurred there in August 1985.

Ryan says it took several years for the economy to rebound before the borough could implement plans to transform the 40-acre tract into usable open space. In fact, Ryan says

it wasn’t until Linda Schwager was elected Oakland’s mayor in 2011 that the borough even began to plan for the transformation of the site into a public park. Mayor Schwager and Mike Guadagnino, who chairs the borough’s recreation commission, were aware of Ryan’s dog park dream and brought him in as a stakeholder in the future of what would become Great Oak Park.

Suddenly, he recalls, town halls were held, presentations were made and committees were formed. Ryan’s 8th-grade project had stretched its way into his junior year of high school, but he was determined to see it through, especially when his mother Jill, a dog lover who supported Ryan’s dream, passed away from cancer in August 2012 at the age of 48.

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Ryan, Scooby & Riley with Oakland resident Nima Ashtyani (left) & his pooches at the site of the proposed dog park.



Ryan says his initial thought after his mom's passing was to step away from the project. He thought it would be too great a burden to bear on top of everything else. But he quickly realized he couldn't do that. "I decided that I had to do this for Mom," he admits. "I have to get this done now."

Ryan also decided that the dog park should be named in his mother's honor. "She was the one who encouraged me to get a dog park," he says. "It became a passion project. It became very personal."

Jill Schwertfeger had set an example for her son by being active in the community. Her volunteerism included work with a local Meals on Wheels program, as well as Therapy Dogs International. She had Scooby trained as a therapy dog, and the two of them would regularly visit the Oakland Rehabilitation & Healthcare Center, as well as Oakland Public Library's therapy dog program for children.

So Ryan, now 23, continues his work on his 8th-grade project, but there are still several obstacles to overcome. On the property there are trees to clear, asphalt and concrete to dig up and remove, fences and signs to be erected, and a required water line to be run. Because a

stream runs through it, the proposed site of the dog park must be approved by the state Department of Environmental Protection (DEP). Guadagnino speculated recently that the borough won't hear back from the DEP on the matter for about a year.

And then there is the not-so-small matter of money. Ryan says the borough finally gave him the green light to start raising funds at the end of 2016. "The town told me, 'You put up the funds to build it, and once it's built, we'll pay to maintain it,'" he says.

The focus now is on holding fundraisers, seeking out donations from local businesses and applying for grants. The financial goal is \$80,000 to \$100,000. As of last month, Ryan says, the dog park fund had around \$23,000 in the bank, and another \$25,000 in pledged donations. "We're about halfway there," he says. "The problem is getting the other half."

Optimistically, he hopes to see the Jill Schwertfeger Memorial Dog Park opened by the end of 2019. At that point, he will have spent 10 of his 24 years on Earth trying to make it happen. It would be especially sweet if Scooby and his pug companion, Riley, could be its first visitors. ↪