

Finishing what they started

■ *Business is teeming at the new Stafford Hills Club, but a health scare almost kept it from being built*

By **PATRICK MALEE**
The Review

Jim Zupancic built the Stafford Hills Club to help promote and contribute to a healthier lifestyle in his community.

That was the perfected, made-for-brochure statement that he and his wife, Marla, genuinely believed in from the time they first had the idea for the club in 2009 all the way to the tail end of 2011, when construction was about to begin.

Then, on Oct. 10, 2011, Jim Zupancic had a heart attack.

It was severe, and he barely survived. At her husband's side while he slowly recovered, Marla Zupancic — herself a former nurse — knew exactly what had triggered the attack.

Risk factors like excessive drinking, smoking or obesity didn't apply to Jim, but he had been under plenty of stress — perhaps the most silent and deadly of all.

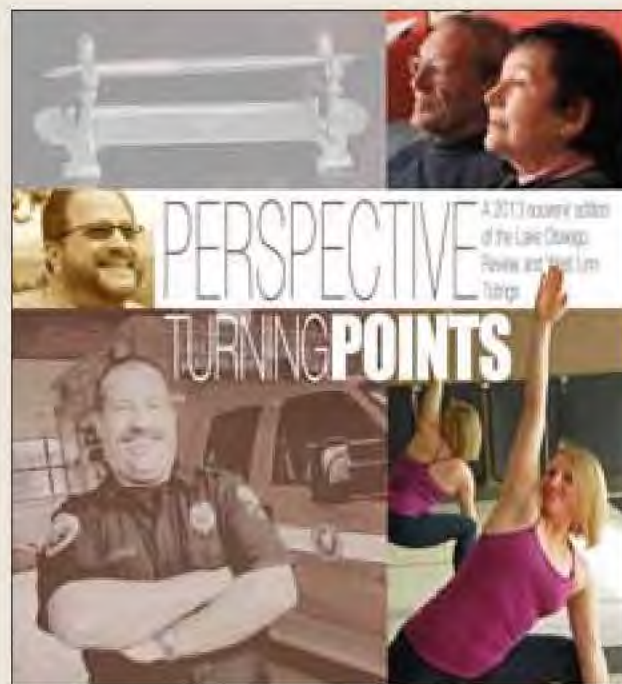
A real estate attorney by trade, Zupancic knew exactly what he was getting into when he decided to take on the project. But that hadn't made it any easier dealing with land use permits and juggling between federal, state and local agencies while laying the groundwork for the facility. By the end of it all, something had to give.

In the midst of an effort to improve the well-being of others, Zupancic's own health betrayed him.



REVIEW PHOTO: VERN UYETAKE

Jim and Marla Zupancic stand above the tennis courts at the Stafford Hills Club.



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“We were creating this so people could live healthy lifestyles, and here I have a heart attack in the process of trying to create it,” Zupancic said. “It was ironic, but we knew that there were a lot of other people in my situation that need to have a place like this where they can come together in a community of supportive people to lead healthier lifestyles.”

Yet as far as the Zupancics had come with

the project, the heart scare led to a junction full of uncertainty. In the immediate aftermath of the attack, as Jim Zupancic began the recovery process, the couple and their five children gathered for a family meeting to discuss whether to finish the project at all.

“It was a conscious, well-thought-out decision whether or not to go forward,” Marla Zupancic said. “I think ultimately it was that very thing that we’re talking about — just leaving something, leaving this part of the world a better place ... and also having a place for us to be a part of that is going to benefit us and our own health, so that he can get stronger and rehabilitate and get back to a lifestyle that we were enjoying prior to his heart attack — of being active.”

And so they pressed on, this time monitoring Jim's every move to make sure he avoided the ever-present traps of stress. When the \$19 million project was finally completed, and it came time for the grand opening, Zupancic felt a pit growing in his stomach as he and Marla made the short drive over. They'd invested virtually their entire life savings in the project, and though there had been hundreds of membership deposits in the early going, would the people really follow through?

“It's like throwing a party and wondering if anybody is ever going to come,” Jim Zupancic, a former Lake Oswego School Board

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Club: They did come, though, and in droves

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member, said. “Only on a bigger scale.”

They did come, though, and in droves. As it turned out, the Zupancics’ instincts had been correct back in 2009; there had been a void in the community, and four years later it looked to have been filled.

“The energy, the positiveness, the people — the excitement around them was palpable,” Jim Zupancic said. “And we went away from that saying this is unbelievable.”

“I guess we did it,” Marla Zupancic said as they drove home.

After Jim Zupancic’s heart attack in 2011, he and Marla consulted carefully with their five children before deciding to press on with the project.

**REVIEW PHOTO:
VERN UYETAKE**



Now, when Jim Zupancic walks through the club, he looks specifically for families playing tennis or working out together — using the club as the kind of activity center the Zupancics wished they had while their kids were growing up.

“I think we have a sense of this community,” he said. “And people live in this community because they value education, they value families, and they want to have things where families can be supported. And that’s pretty much what this is.”

Of course, it also serves as both a reminder of his brush with mortality and as a symbol of renewal. He rehabilitated at Legacy Meridian

Park Medical Center, which happens to be located right behind the club; now, because the Stafford Hills Club is also a certified medical facility, there will be a path constructed to connect the two buildings.

“So much of our passion around this was to say, ‘What could we do to help people live these healthier lifestyles?’” Jim Zupancic said. “I just didn’t know I was going to be the first patient.”