

# VILLAGE LIFE

EL DORADO HILLS, CALIFORNIA



## Honoring Jeff's spirit: Deputy Jeff Mitchell Field opens with fanfare, memories

By Mike Roberts | Village Life staff writer | August 31, 2009 15:38



**PROUD DAY** — Crystal Mitchell and son Jake cut the ribbon at Deputy Jeff Mitchell Field Saturday. The Little League Field is dedicated to Jeff and all other public safety officers who dedicate their lives to making their communities safer. Photo by Bill Grava

The distinctive clink of aluminum on 12 inches of stitched imitation leather stretched over a polyurethane core was heard for the first time at Deputy Jeff Mitchell Field Saturday morning.

Softball has been played at the dusty diamond in El Dorado Hills' Park Village since 1970, when local residents decided that Bertelsen Park needed a baseball diamond, and built one themselves.

That legacy of volunteerism continued through 2007, 2008 and 2009 as the community again stepped up to renovate the aging field as a public service memorial to slain Sacramento Sheriff Deputy Jeff Mitchell, who lived in Serrano with his wife Crystal and his son Jake until Oct. 27, 2006, when he was shot during a routine traffic stop. The murder remains unsolved.

Mitchell grew up in Campbell, Calif., the product of a Little League family in a Little League town. Campbell has one of the most successful youth baseball programs in the country, reaching 14 World Series from 1960-87.

Jeff Mitchell and his brothers Greg and Steve were involved in several of those teams as players or coaches.

Jeff coached the Little League Cubs in El Dorado Hills with his friend and neighbor Bill Burke, a key early advocate of a memorial.

To make it happen, organizers raised more than \$1 million in the teeth of the worst economy since the Great Depression. Little Leaguers donated their allowances. Local businesses like Bank of America and Waste Connections donated \$100,000 each. Others, like PG&E, the El Dorado Hills Rotary, the Firefighters Association, Little League and AT&T also donated big chunks of much needed hard currency.

The El Dorado Hills Community Services District eventually contributed \$100,000, plus another \$200,000 in field drainage repairs that were needed anyway. Roebbelen and Land Architecture got involved early, each donating more than \$100,000 in services. Others companies, already cash-strapped and struggling in the down economy, donated labor and materials.

Architect Steve Fuhrman masterminded several iterations of field design, sweating the details with Roebbelen project manager Steve Alber while a steering committee made up of an El Dorado Hills "who's who" of local business and civic leaders sought to overcome the larger obstacles - like money.

But all that seemed a distant memory watching Jeff and Crystal's young son Jake, now 9 years old, bounce around the infield on a sunny Saturday morning, flashing his dad's winning smile and making everyone present feel good about the world.

Crystal, grandmother Mary Kay, uncles Steve and Greg, aunts and cousins, many still living in Campbell, thanked their adopted community at every opportunity.

During a pre-opening ceremony scrimmage called "Guns and Hoses," local police, firefighters and their sons broke the new field in for Little Leaguers waiting eagerly in the dugout for their turn on the lush green infield.

Behind the backstop, Crystal Mitchell's smile told the story. "These guys broke their butts," she said of architect Fuhrman and fund-raiser Susan Johnson, "So did (Roebbelen project manager) Steve Alber and (then CSD Planning Director) Dianna Hillyer," who grappled with the day-to-day details it took to create the tournament-class Little League field on the cheap.

After crossing home plate for the third time, Jake Mitchell took a moment to talk with Village Life. Taking the scene in with a wisdom beyond his years, the 9-year-old said simply "I think this is all real good. It's fun."

Jake said he remembers his dad, and that he misses his smile most. He also misses the baseball. Jeff Mitchell coached his son's Little League team. "I was catcher; he showed me how to do it," said Jake. "I'm a pitcher now."

Jake Mitchell wants the boys and girls that play on his father's namesake field to feel good about his father. "They should feel happy about him," said Jake. "He was a good man."

Firefighter and Honor Guard Commander Matt Becket coordinated a deeply moving presentation that included honor and color guards from seven different agencies in the area.

When the last notes of Savannah Argyle's National Anthem echoed off the Brooks gymnasium wall, Sacramento County Undersheriff Mark Iwasa led off a parade of speakers that included Bank of American executive Eric Stanion, Little League board

Steve Fuhrman emceed the event, and evoked the full gamut baseball metaphors. He artfully deployed pinch hitters, relievers, extra innings and even a Ron Mittelstaedt squeeze play to describe the perseverance required to get the memorial built in the current down economy. "In the bottom of the ninth we came away with enough money to see this become a reality," he concluded.

Lowery thanked his board, especially Director Tony Rogozinski, a Little League activist, for standing by the project through the district's grueling fiscal belt tightening earlier this year that saw Hillier's director position eliminated. She later accepted staff position in Planning, but continued to serve on the steering committee.

"As important as this park is to the community, it's a small token to the sacrifice that Jeff made for this community and the people he served in Sacramento," said Lowery. "Jeff, I know you're probably watching all this. Please accept this gift from our community."

Mittelstaedt, who coached Little League locally for 12 years, explained the three reasons he got involved. "One was to honor Jeff Mitchell," he said. "The second is that nothing brings a community together more than youth sports, especially baseball."

His third reason echoed an argument that El Dorado Hills Little League officials and parents have made for years. "In 2006 I coached a team that went to the sectionals," recalled Mittelstaedt. "We had to practice in Folsom for several weeks because that was the closest field with grass and lights. We were eventually kicked off. There will never be another El Dorado Hills team that has to practice outside this community."

Roebbelen President Terry Street followed, recalling how nervous his subcontractors got when he called. "We took it to them pretty good, and boy did they respond."

"A lot of this concrete was placed and finished free of charge," he said. "Dirt was moved. Sod was discounted. Materials were given. Fencing prices were cut in half."

Doug Veerkamp topped the list of in-kind donors at \$30,000. Others who contributed more than \$1,000 include Coca Cola, who paid for the center field scoreboard without asking that the company name be placed on it, REY Engineers, Carter Kelly, Crusader Fence, Basalite Concrete, Miracle Recreation, RR Mayer, Luppen & Hawley, EJ Masonry, HEMCOR Construction, Weckworth Electric, Quickrete, Martin Brothers Construction, Valley Crest Tree Company, Hunter Industries, Thunder Mountain Enterprises and Delta Bluegrass.

The crowd sought shade in the triple digit heat, but came up largely empty. That topic would come up as part of Fuhrman's fund-raising pitch for phase two of the project which will include much-needed shade structures, bathrooms and a snack shack. Go to [www.JeffMitchellField.com](http://www.JeffMitchellField.com) to help out.

Emcee Fuhrman commended Crystal Mitchell for the way she's handled the publicity around her family's personal tragedy. "When I first met you it was a very difficult time," he said. "Your spirit amazed me then, and it continues to do so now."

The two exchanged a hug and Crystal took the microphone.

"This is a long awaited honor for us," she said. Gesturing to the steering committee and supporters she said, "The Mitchell family appreciates all the time you spent away from your families and your jobs to make this day a reality."

She thanked Fire Capt. Brad Ballenger and all the firefighters. "You have touched my heart," she said. "You've made me a part of your family. I will be forever grateful to your hard work and love."

To architect Fuhrman she added, "This is your vision, and it's an absolutely beautiful field. I couldn't be more proud. I'd give anything if my husband, who was my best friend, could be here. Since that's not possible, I'll just have to come out here with my son, my family, and my community every chance I get. I want to thank this community for that."

"Jeff was a simple, happy man," Crystal added. "He was everyone's friend. He loved his family, his dog, his community and baseball. He also loved challenges and always found ways to get things done, just like these people up here found a way to get this done. This project represents Jeff's spirit."

She closed by encouraging the Little Leaguers to appreciate their parents and to "be thankful to the law enforcement officers and firefighters who work tirelessly to make sure you and your family are safe."

The Mitchell family joined her on the field for the ribbon cutting. Jake Mitchell threw out the first pitch. A couple minutes later Dylan Vanderveer, 11, got the first hit at Jeff Mitchell Field, a single up the middle.

The after-party up the hill at the Bertelsen Park pavilion and spray park included inflatables, free hot dogs, a rock band and lots of hugs. Supervisor Ray Nutting got soaked, and everyone had a great time.