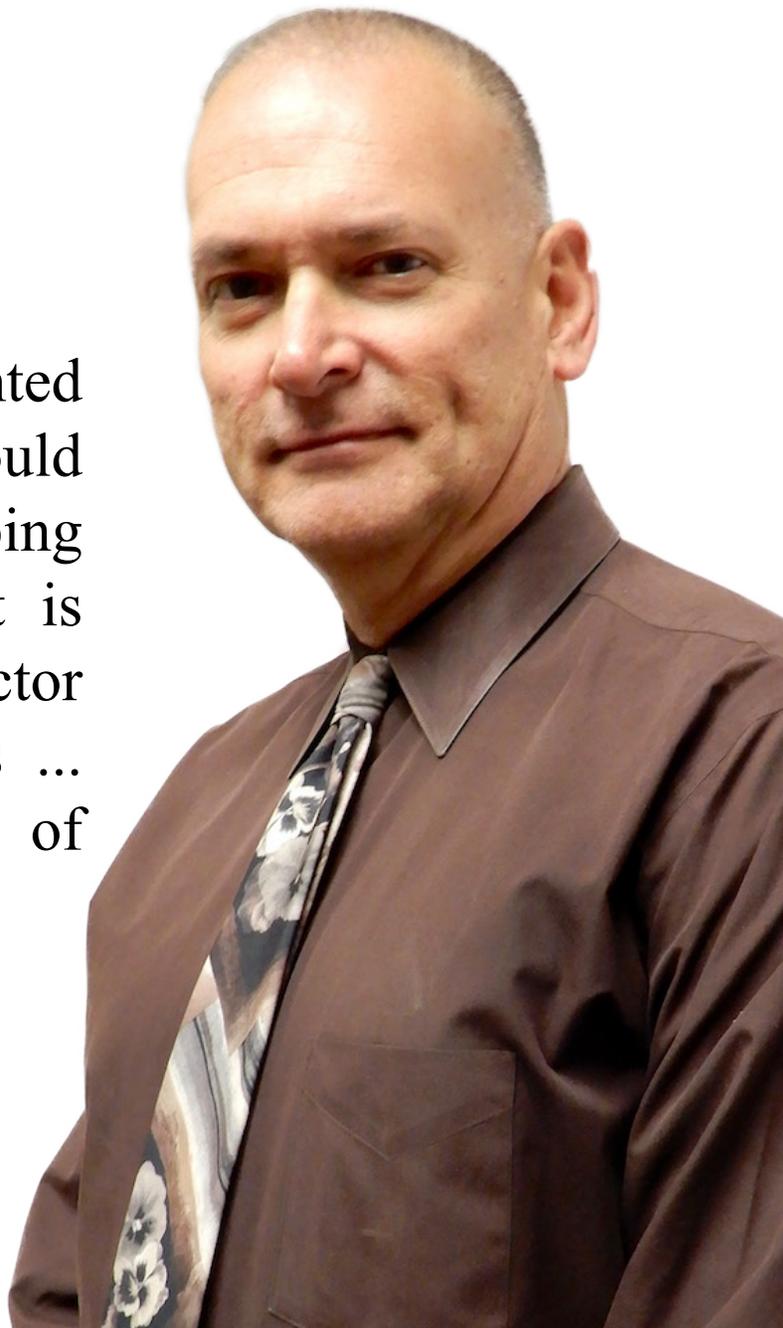


“Many people in my life ... planted the seed early on that I should always be conscious of helping others. And right now, that is through my position as director of Big Brothers Big Sisters ... Dedicated to the mission of PEACE, Inc. for a lifetime.”



John Bruzdziński



EMPOWERING PEOPLE TO THRIVE | EST. 1968

WHY DID YOU DECIDE TO MAKE PEACE, INC. PART OF YOUR LIFE?

BRUZZDZINSKI: I was the assistant principal at Bishop Ludden for 12+ years. It was a great run for me. I love the school. Great students, great parents, great staff. But I was at a point in my life where I was looking to make a career change. During my time at Ludden, I got to know our boy's soccer coach, Oscar Vergara. Last June, I heard that Oscar was retiring after 19 years as the director of the Big Brothers Big Sisters program. Through our conversations over the years, I became very interested in what he was doing with the Big Brothers Big Sisters program. And I've always been impressed with PEACE, Inc. I've always heard great things about the agency. So when this opportunity came along, Oscar and I sat down and discussed this possibility at length. I liked what I heard. So I followed up on it. And here I am. I am in a real good place right now. I feel that I am where I belong at this point in my life. I prayed and prayed over this. I wanted to make the right decision for myself - and each day that passes, I am more and more convinced that I did.

HOW DOES YOUR DEPARTMENT HELP KEEP THE PEACE AT PEACE, INC.?

BRUZZDZINSKI: The Big Brothers Big Sisters program has a profound effect on the youth of the community, especially those from disadvantaged circumstances. They're our future. It's critical that we guide them now. Direct them. Give them the necessary tools for decision-making. We have a group of professional staff people here at Big Brothers Big Sisters who are very, very skilled at serving this population. Like many of the programs at PEACE, Inc., we play a critical role in youth development.

PRETEND TODAY IS YOUR FIRST DAY AT PEACE, INC. – AND YOU GET TO KEEP ALL OF THE INSIGHT YOU HAVE FROM YOUR EXPERIENCE AT PEACE, INC. TO DATE – WHAT WOULD YOUR FIRST DAY BE LIKE?

BRUZZDZINSKI: I learned in my 22-year Boys & Girls Club career that establishing relationships is a key to success, not just professionally, but personally too. So even though I haven't been here at PEACE, Inc. very long, I would think back to all the people I've met and have been introduced to in that short time and keep them close at hand. It's been a blessing to meet all these people.

WHAT CAN THOSE YOU SERVE DO TO HELP YOU HELP THEM?

BRUZZDZINSKI: When I prepared for my initial interview for the Big Brothers Big Sisters director position, I researched the mission statement for PEACE, Inc. simply because I am a big believer in how well an agency's mission statement aligns with the services they actually provide. What caught my eye about the PEACE, Inc. mission statement was that ... in so many words ... the agency would teach people to help themselves ... to make themselves self-sufficient ... so that at some point they can help others in a similar way. I thought that mission statement was one of the best I ever read. Short, to the point, and concise - I loved it. Similarly, what we are trying to do with Big Brothers Big Sisters is encourage and support growth and character development in young people - so that they can not only succeed in life, but they are enabled to contribute to society some day. It's about helping people to help themselves. No handouts, but developing competency in people so that they can then stand on their own at some point. It all comes back to the mission statement.

WHO IS THE PULSE OF PEACE, INC.?

BRUZZDZINSKI: Every great organization has a great leader. Everything starts from the top and trickles down. The compassion that I feel from Joe O'Hara, the executive director of PEACE, Inc., and the professional manner in which he operates can be seen and felt throughout the entire agency. For many years I've heard wonderful things about Joe out in the community and now I hear it from inside the agency as well. You don't need any further motivation to do your job when your leader believes in and lives the mission statement like Joe does.

ARE YOU THE SAME YOU, YOU WERE WHEN YOU STARTED WORKING AT PEACE, INC.?

BRUZZDZINSKI: In the time I've been here, I'm feeling my old self, the human service side of me, returning. I spent 22 years with the Boys & Girls Club of Syracuse. Then I spent three years with New Justice Services. So, my roots are in human services. My bachelor's degree is in human services. As stated earlier, for the past 12 years I've enjoyed myself in the education field at Bishop Ludden and I truly appreciate everything that was done for me there ... everything I experienced there. It was a memorable time. But, now that I have returned to the human services field, memories of my roots are flashing back to me. This is where my heart is. Many of the same people and the same agencies that I worked with so closely years ago are still around and doing quite well.

SUM UP ONE THING YOU WANT OTHERS TO ALWAYS REMEMBER.

BRUZZDZINSKI: Many people in my life - teachers, coaches, people at the Boys & Girls Club when I was growing up, my sister, my mom, but especially my dad - planted the seed early on that I should always be conscious of helping others. I came to realize that I was put on this earth to help make other people's lives a little bit better in some way, shape, or form. And right now, that way, shape, or form ... is through Big Brothers Big Sisters.

SHARE A DEFINITIVE MOMENT IN YOUR WORK EXPERIENCE.

BRUZZDZINSKI: I don't know if I would call this a definitive moment. Toward the end of my Boys & Girls Club career, shortly after my dad passed away, one of my cousins or aunts had a conversation with my sister. Whatever family member it was made the comment to my sister - that John - meaning me - is just like his dad - always serving and helping others. When my sister told me that, I had to shut the lights off in my office and close the door. I was in tears. To be compared to my dad. Wow. That was probably the biggest compliment I've ever received in my life. That was a moment of verification ... of confirmation ... that I was on track. If I had any doubts up to that point about whether I was in the right career field, well, those doubts quickly vanished.

My dad was funny. He wasn't overly friendly. He could be gruff at times. He kept to himself. Very private. But he'd be at the senior center serving dinner, coaching little league, clearing the snow from sidewalks around the neighborhood, taking care of my mom as her health slowly deteriorated. But he didn't want to be recognized or seen. And he made it clear to me that, that is the way it should be. Humble. Modest. He'd just go about his business, doing these things to help others, help their lives be a little bit better. Like it was something that he, or we, were supposed to do, once God placed us on his earth.

Talking about definitive moments, from 1976 - when I first walked into a Boys & Girls Club - to 1990, I had been a member, volunteer, part-time staff, then full-time professional staff. Then, in late 1990, a new executive director took the Boys & Girls Club from basically being a neighborhood recreation center to a more social and educational development type of program. This was based on and modeled after a national initiative for the transition and it was largely driven by funding. But, the gym was still there, there was still summer camp and field trips, arts and crafts - these remained staples of the program. Yet, there were now programs that focused on social interactions, personal hygiene, helping students pursue higher education, career awareness, and preparing young adults to enter the workforce. We were suddenly partnering with schools to streamline help for students, especially their education. I went from wearing gym clothes everyday, playing some ball, breaking a sweat now and then, and viewing myself as a coach... to being a building and program manager. I was suddenly in meetings with the mayor and with principals and CEOs of companies. I was serving on bureaus and rubbing elbows with the decision makers. I had to learn to speak in public and shake hands with purpose and represent the organization. Professionally and personally it was a defining moment. This change in program format was a blessing in disguise for not only the kids we served, but it also launched my career and took me to places that I had never imagined I would go. The rest is history.