

THE SUN

WEST SENECA

THURSDAY, JANUARY 16, 2020



Cellino
PLUMBING & HVAC

PLUMBING
HVAC
WATER TREATMENT
UNDERGROUND

716-265-0003



West Seneca Sun and Buffalo News file photos

Mike Capriotto, left, and Mark Croce were well-known for their business acumen and work in the Western New York community.

Community mourns businessmen's deaths

Capriotto was a staple in Orchard Park; Croce led downtown resurgence

By James Farrell
SUN STAFF REPORTER

A helicopter crash in Pennsylvania last week shook the Western New York community, with unique resonance in the Southtowns.

The helicopter was carrying two prominent local businessmen widely recognized for their contributions to their community. The two men — developer Mark Croce, 58, and businessman Mike Capriotto, 63 — were both declared dead at the scene. Both were from Orchard Park.

In the days following their deaths, prominent community leaders from across the region have issued statements reflecting on their legacies.

Croce is widely remembered

for his devotion to the resurgence of downtown Buffalo and his ownership of several popular businesses, including the Buffalo Chophouse and Curtiss Hotel.

Capriotto, meanwhile, a 1974 West Seneca West graduate well-known in Orchard Park, was remembered for his contributions to the business community, his role as president of the Woodlawn Cemetery Association, serving as a Village of Orchard Park board trustee and his reputation for volunteering to help with major

projects throughout the town.

A statement provided by Town Supervisor Patrick Keem on behalf of the Orchard Park Town Board described their deaths as “a tragic loss to both our town and our region.”

“They made their home community and all of Western New York stronger and better places to live,” the statement reads. “They will be greatly missed. We extend our deepest sympathies to

See **Remembered** on Page A6

Town laborer in need of a kidney

By Kristi Runyan
SUN CORRESPONDENT

A West Seneca man with a hereditary kidney disease finds himself in desperate need of a kidney transplant, 13 years after receiving his first one.

Tom Amoia suffers from polycystic kidney disease, a sickness that, while not incredibly rare, has no cure.

There are two types of polycystic kidney disease — one type that children are born with, and the other that affects a person later in life, as is the case with Amoia.

“My mom, sister, aunt and cousin had this,” he said. “It came

from somewhere down the line.” Amoia, who is employed in the Town of West Seneca’s buildings and grounds department, has been off work for seven months while he battles the kidney disease. His wife Melissa has also taken time off from work to help him during this difficult time.

“I had a lot of sick time and vacation built up, but it’s just about out,” he said. “I’ll probably have to retire on disability.”

The prospect of retiring early isn’t one Amoia is happy about.

“I’ve been working since I was 12 with a paper route,” he said. “But trying to keep my house is just hard.”

When the disease first reared

See **Kidney** on Page A6



Photo courtesy of LifeStorageBlog

Tom Amoia, pictured here in a profile about his use of LifeStorage for his son’s belongings while attending college, suffers from a hereditary kidney disease and is in need of a kidney 13 years after receiving his first transplant.

Garbage collection issue back in front of board

By Lian Bunny
SUN STAFF REPORTER

A group of largely new Town of West Seneca officials inherited a host of information, ongoing projects and challenges from outgoing officials. One of the issues came up at last Monday’s Town Board meeting: a group of town homes which didn’t receive garbage pickup.

The town supervisor, three council members, highway superintendent and town clerk are all new in 2020.

Mike Harmon of Harmon Homes Realty Inc. spoke at a Town Board meeting over the summer on behalf of the four town neighborhoods — the Burchfield Village, Hillcrest Heights, Hillcrest Heights North and the Westview Park Association, all of which he manages.

He said the town assessor’s office had recently notified the communities that the town two decades ago mistakenly classified the area as condominiums rather than homeowners’ associations.

Now that the properties have been re-evaluated, the condo status has been taken away, leading to an increase in taxes this year. The town homes want garbage pickup, just like the other homes get for residents who also pay town taxes. In past years, they’ve contracted with Modern on their own to pick up their garbage.

Town officials said at a September Town Board meeting they were working with Modern Disposal and putting together a memorandum of understanding so that the town’s garbage pickup was allowed onto what are technically considered private roads. The goal was to extend the garbage pickup by the end of the year.

However, Harmon stood up again before the Town Board at last Monday’s meeting, saying the four local communities he manages had left out trash in January that wasn’t picked up by the town’s highway department. He said he called Modern Disposal and the company said the town was picking up the neighborhoods’ garbage as of Jan. 1.

“Now I’ve got garbage sitting out in all these communities and no one picking it up,” Harmon said Monday night. “What do I do now?”

Brian Adams, who took office as highway superintendent at the beginning of the year, said he wasn’t sure if something slipped with this issue during the transition period between now former-highway superintendent Matthew English and himself, but that he didn’t know of any paperwork that existed indicating Jan. 1 was the date the town was taking over the

See **Collection** on Page A5

\$1.50
Subscribe: 849-4000

Breakfast networking session



The first of six breakfast networking events in 2020 kicked off this week.

» See Page B4

FIND OUT WHAT'S HAPPENING IN YOUR NEIGHBORHOOD.

THE SUN

LANCASTER - DEPEW
HAMBURG | ORCHARD PARK
WEST SENECA | TONAWANDA

Subscribe to The Sun, your community newspaper

849-4000 or sun-news.com

General Physician, PC Primary Care – West Seneca

Helping You Live Your Best Life



general physician pc
primary care
eugene kalmuk md

- Flu Shots Now Available
- Physicals
- Chronic Disease Management
- Depression & Anxiety
- Vaccinations

290 Center Road,
Suite 206
West Seneca, NY 14224

716.608.6116
www.gppconline.com

Accepting New Patients

Capriotto converted car shop into business plaza in village

REMEMBERED From Page A1

their families and friends. We send them our thoughts and prayers and hope those who are grieving will draw some comfort from the way in which their loved ones were appreciated by those around them.”

According to reports, Croce was piloting the helicopter, which crashed in a residential neighborhood in Central Pennsylvania at around 8:30 p.m.

The National Transportation Safety Board is investigating the cause of the crash, which is still not known. The board was expected to issue its preliminary findings some time in the next week.

But in the meantime, local leaders continue to reflect on the legacies of two men who have left a considerable impact on the region – in Orchard Park and beyond.

Capriotto: A pillar of Orchard Park

According to those who knew him, Capriotto's constant willingness to lend a hand made him a staple in the Orchard Park community – someone who's been involved in some capacity in just about every major initiative to come through town, often behind the scenes.

“I think where we're going to feel the strongest void is that he's not only a financial contributor but he's also a person that has vision,” said Don Lorentz, the executive director of the Orchard Park Chamber of Commerce and a long-time friend of Capriotto's. “Many of the things that happen in the village here, he was instrumental for having some type of voice.”

Capriotto served as the president of Woodlawn Cemetery Association and was heavily involved in several big community projects, including the revitalization of the village's Veterans Memorial Park and the historic train depot. He served on the Village Board of Trustees in the 1990s and was remembered as an advocate for local businesses.

And in 1997, he was recognized for his commitment to the community when he received the prestigious Post of Fame award, which goes to outstanding Orchard Park residents.

Perhaps his most visible contribution to the Orchard Park community is his business plaza, known as the Bauer Village Center – which includes the Kwik Fill gas station, Tim Hortons and Pedego e-bike shop, all just across the street from Orchard Park's municipal building.

Capriotto owned the property when it was an automotive repair service known as Bauer Service. He eventually sold the repair division of the store to longtime employee David Bergner who moved that part of the business up the road after Capriotto converted the space to the plaza that exists there currently.

Bergner said that Capriotto's decision to convert the space into a business plaza was emblematic of the type of businessman that Capriotto was – an intelligent and ambitious mind who cared deeply for his community.

“Mike was a really smart man,” Bergner said. “Very smart businessman, good guy. A wicked go-getter – the grass never grew under his feet.”

Capriotto contributed more to the community and helped more people out than people will ever realize, Bergner said. And that includes Bergner himself, who is appreciative for the business opportunity that Capriotto gave him in offering to sell him the repair portion of Bauer Automotive.

“For me, honestly, it was the opportunity he gave me to be able to do what I've done for my family,” Bergner said.

Capriotto's “go-getter” mentality applied to everything he did, from his business to volunteering, his friends said.

In her capacity as village mayor, Jo Ann Litwin Clinton frequently witnessed how Capriotto, a longtime friend, was always quick to help people – how he often did so from behind the scenes and without being asked.

She recalls how he would come out to help village employees when he saw them putting up wreaths throughout the village. Or how, on late nights, when members of the Department of Public Works were out clearing snow, it was common to see him show up with his own equipment to help.

“It's going to be a huge loss for our community and it's just so sad



Sun file photo

Mike Capriotto's Village of Orchard Park business plaza, known as the Bauer Village Center, includes the Kwik Fill gas station, Tim Hortons and Pedego e-bike shop.

and so sudden and it just reminds you to make sure that those people who do everything, you thank them,” Litwin Clinton said. “I know he knows we appreciate it. But I just wish I had more time to tell him how much we appreciate everything he did for Orchard Park.”

Others recalled countless stories of quiet selflessness – whether it was a financial donation to a local project, volunteering his time at the Village Street Dance, or using his front-end loader to plow his neighbors' driveways without being asked.

“There are things that people know that Mike has done, but there's a million more that nobody knows,” said Joe Wales, owner of Arthur's True Value Hardware and Home Furnishings, which is next door to Capriotto's Bauer Village Center.

Orchard Park resident John Schroeder has also seen Capriotto's willingness to step in and help. Schroeder's been working with a committee for the past few years to revitalize the Veterans Memorial Park, located near the Bauer Village Center. Capriotto wasn't part of that committee, but it didn't stop him from helping out.

Schroeder said that much of the park's progress is owed to Capriotto's contributions. In addition to providing a monetary donation, Capriotto helped install many of the fixtures in the park himself, using his own tools.

That included putting up the memorial wall inside the park, helping build walkways and pouring the foundation for a recently added bronze statue.

“He was always right there to help out, setting up the foundations. He had all the tools, he had the know-how, he'd bring lumber with him,” Schroeder recalled. “Now I've got another statue ordered for this spring ... And now I'm thinking, ‘oh wow, what am I going to do this year?’ Because I could always count on Mike to do that.”

In fact, it was actually Capriotto's willingness to offer his expertise that first introduced him to Croce. According to Lorentz of the Chamber of Commerce, Capriotto bought himself a water laser jet after he retired from the car-service industry. After meeting Croce, he offered to cut the tiles that would eventually line the floor of a project that Croce was working on at the time: the Curtiss Hotel.

Croce: Revitalizing downtown

There was a common theme in the statements, thoughts and well-wishes shared by community officials in the wake of last week's crash: Mark Croce has played a crucial role in the ongoing revitalization of downtown Buffalo.

The developer owned several prominent businesses in the area, including the Buffalo Chophouse, Curtiss Hotel and the Statler City banquet hall. In a commentary published on Friday, the Buffalo News remembered Croce as a pioneering developer “who not only dared to invest in downtown Buffalo at a time when it was reeling, but who also dared to do it by renovating

some of its old, vacant buildings.”

In a Facebook post, Buffalo Mayor Byron Brown agreed with that sentiment.

“As owner of the Buffalo Chophouse, the Curtiss Hotel and Statler City, Mark was a big part of our downtown resurgence, adding jobs for residents and creating destinations that have brought many visitors to the city of Buffalo,” he said. “His presence will be sorely missed.”

Other community leaders also weighed in on Croce's contributions. County Comptroller Stefan Mychajliw said in a statement that Croce “believed in the resurgence and potential of Buffalo when not many others did.” U.S. Rep. Brian Higgins, whose district includes West Seneca, called Croce “a long-time friend and as big a booster of Buffalo as there ever was.”

Croce's influence was known here in Orchard Park as well, even among those who didn't know him personally, including Litwin Clinton.

“I did not know Mark personally,” she said. “I knew, of course, of all his things he did in the Buffalo community because you constantly were reading about his development plans.”

Others in the region have emerged with more personal stories to tell of Croce. In a letter to the editor submitted to The Sun this week, South Wales resident Anne Rogers recalled how, in 2017, Croce made the day of her nephew Michael, who had been struggling to recover from a traumatic brain injury.

Michael was a fan of luxury cars, Rogers wrote. A mutual friend alerted Croce about Michael's situation, and on the day that Croce opened the Curtiss Hotel, he took a break from his busy schedule and took Michael on a ride in his red McLaren car.

“Michael, and my whole family, has never forgotten the kindness of this generous man, previously unknown to us,” Rogers wrote. “It was a very bright spot in a bleak period for our family. Michael still reminisces about riding in that amazing car.”

And former Erie County Legislator Lynne Dixon, in a Facebook post, said that on the morning of Croce's death, she drove her son to school, showing him the Curtiss Hotel, Buffalo Chophouse and Statler and recounting stories of Croce's life.

“Mark Croce dreamed big,” Dixon said. “He imagined what others couldn't. He took chances on our city. Where others may have dipped their toe to test the waters, Mark dove right in.”

Croce's company, the Buffalo Development Corporation, issued a statement thanking the community for its well wishes and also assuring the public that his businesses will continue “without interruption.”

“We will be prepared at the appropriate time to have a more in-depth discussion of Mr. Croce's life, what it meant to Buffalo and the future of his companies,” the company said in a statement.

LETTER TO THE EDITOR

Croce remembered fondly for kind act

Dear editor,

In 2017, my nephew Michael was struggling to make a comeback from a devastating traumatic brain injury he suffered three years earlier, when he was just 24-years-old.

That summer Michael came to Buffalo, from Columbus, Ohio, to visit my family for a week. His own parents needed a respite from providing care for him 24/7, and Michael needed a break from his home routine.

He was working hard to walk and talk again; progress was going very slowly. A mutual friend observed Michael's interest in luxury supercars and contacted Mark Croce to tell him about Michael.

On the day that the Curtiss Hotel opened, Mark stepped out of a meeting, set aside his considerable “to-do” list and pulled his beautiful red McLaren car out of the hotel parking garage.

He buckled Michael – a complete stranger to him – into the passenger seat and away they went. They were gone from the parking lot for over 30 minutes. When they returned, looking windblown and elated, Michael's beaming face told me everything I needed to know. The ride had been incredible.

He told me later they drove VERY fast on the Skyway. Mark Croce helped Michael out of the car, welcomed us to his beautiful new hotel and hurried back to his business at hand.

Michael, and my whole family, has never forgotten the kindness of this generous man, previously unknown to us. It was a very bright spot in a bleak period for our family. Michael still reminisces about riding in that amazing car.

The loss of Mark Croce will be felt by our community for a very long time. And by Michael ... forever.

Anne Rogers
South Wales

Waiting years ‘scary’ to think about for Amoia

KIDNEY From Page A1

its head when Amoia was 44, he didn't have to receive dialysis because his wife was able to be his donor almost immediately. This time around, he is receiving dialysis three times a week and it's very hard on him, Amoia said.

According to Amoia, he's gone through all the tests and is now waiting to get on the donor list at ECMC. He said he's also trying to get on the list at the Cleveland Clinic.

“The average kidney donation lasts between 10 and 15 years, and I got 13 years out of mine,” he said. “It's hard; I get really weak, tired and sick and can't do too much.”

Amoia's sister, Michele Graber of Buffalo, who's formerly of West Seneca, also has polycystic kidney disease, too; they are the only two of five siblings who inherited the disease.

But now that Amoia's kidney has failed and he needs another donor, Graber said she is terribly worried for her brother. Their mother died in 2005 from complications from the disease after nearly two decades with a donated kidney.

“She had her kidney for 18 years and did very well,” Graber said. “It was a cadaver donor, but now they stress trying to get a living donor because they last longer.”

In 2014, Graber found herself in need of a kidney donor. Fortunately, her husband Vincent was able

to be her donor. At first, he didn't qualify and was denied due to his sleep apnea, a condition they had not known about prior. He got his health issues taken care of and then became the perfect match, Graber said.

“If that had gone undetected, it could've caused him a heart attack down the road,” Graber said. “Now we say, ‘You saved me and I saved you.’ It's really a remarkable story.”

Organ donation, in general, is a remarkable thing, according to Graber and Amoia, each of whom benefitted from living kidney donations from their spouses.

“You can live perfectly healthy with one kidney, which is crazy, and I think it's why we were given two, so we could donate the other if necessary,” Graber said. “And if you donate a kidney, the other one gets bigger and rises to the occasion. It's incredible. People wait years and years for a kidney.”

Graber said something else most people don't know is that if you donate a kidney and find yourself in need of one down the road, you go right to the top of the list to receive a donor kidney.

As Amoia continues to wait for another kidney, he'll continue with dialysis throughout that time.

“They say it takes between two and five years on the list,” Amoia said. “It's scary thinking about waiting that long.”

Anyone interested in becoming a kidney donor can call ECMC at 898-6283.

Winterfest to return to Chestnut Ridge Park on Sunday

Winter activities, magic shows and Glenn Colton concert highlight the event

STAFF REPORTS

Winterfest 2020 will be held at Chestnut Ridge Park from 11 a.m. to 4 p.m. Sunday.

If weather permits the free event will feature sledding, skiing, snowboarding and a snow sculpting contest along with other seasonal outdoor activities. Weather forecasters are calling for now Saturday into Sunday.

Erie County Executive Mark C. Poloncarz was joined Monday by Commissioner of Parks, Recreation and Forestry Troy P. Schinzel along with Parks' staff, Ed Leake and members of the Town of Orchard Park Town Recreation Department, and event sponsors to discuss Sunday's activities.

The event is a collaboration between the county and Orchard Park's recreation departments.

“We are hoping that Mother Nature will cooperate and provide an appropriate winter setting with some snow for WinterFest, but even if she does not there will still be plenty of fun to be had at Chestnut Ridge Park,” Poloncarz

said. “Live music, magic shows, arts and crafts and a great atmosphere inside the Casino will all add to the fun and we encourage families to come out and make some great memories.”

A full slate of other activities are scheduled, including a Glenn Colton concert from 1 to 2 p.m., magic shows at 11:30 a.m. and 2:30 p.m., hay rides from noon to 3 p.m., marshmallow roasting and Erie County Parks Forestry demonstrations.

The casino will be open with warming fireplaces and concessions will be available from Grateful Grind, located inside the casino.

Schinzel said the event is also an opportunity to showcase “this historic park” and the many improvements that have been completed there, including the installation of the new tow rope to bring downhill skiing back to Chestnut.

“We are hoping for snow so that people coming to WinterFest will be able to fully enjoy winter activities here,” he said.

Also among WinterFest 2020 sponsors are Towne Auto, Hillcrest Volunteer Fire, Dick's Sporting Goods, the Chestnut Ridge Conservancy, WBEN and legislator John Miles.