

County parks guru calls it quits after 29 years

John Yarbrough built extensive park system for everyone

BY BETSY CLAYTON
Florida Weekly Correspondent

John Yarbrough recalls breaking his leg sliding into a base on field No. 2 during a ball game at Terry Park when he was a boy. He remembers attending Southwest Florida's fair at the park, too, before the Lee Civic Center existed. The event's entrance was just below where his office sits today overlooking shady oaks and palms off Palm Beach Boulevard.

Perhaps what the Florida native, now 59, remembers most clearly about Lee County's parks system back then, though, is that nobody realized it was supposed to be about more than ball fields and beaches.

That changed during Yarbrough's 29 years with Lee County Parks & Recreation, nearly 20 of which he headed the department. Now the man known by most as "JY" is stepping down as part of the county's cost-saving early-out program. Sept. 15 will be his last day overseeing 260 employees, a \$33 million budget and more than 100 parks, preserves, facilities and other sites.

He leaves a legacy of diverse offerings — modern recreation centers, community parks, conservation lands, greenways and blueways, state-of-the-art baseball complexes and pristine beach preserves. He leaves something for everyone, be they a resident, a snowbird or a tourist.

"His vision has helped transform a small parks and recreation system into one that is nationally recognized and provides everything from youth sports, to Major League Baseball facilities, to 20,000 acres of environmental preserves," said Bill Hammond, deputy county manager, who will serve as interim director of the parks and recreation department. "It's a system that provides something for everyone because of John's insistence on being inclusive."

Lee County Commission Chairman Ray Judah echoed that sentiment.

"John Yarbrough has provided strong leadership in the development of our Parks and Recreation system that offers a broad array of outdoor activities ... for our residents and visitors throughout the world," he said.

Perhaps it's ironic that a boy raised in Fort

Myers, who started his working career as a probation and parole officer, would end up leading a department whose main task is to help 620,000 county residents and 2 million annual tourists have fun.

His county colleagues describe him in a series of contrasting images — a humble and soft-spoken man who is a visionary leader. A man with a can-do attitude and commitment to excellence who also knows when to step back and let things unfold. A man of patience but also determination. A consummate professional who routinely — accidentally — wore his tie flipped inside out. He's never seen without his sunglasses around his neck, even though the director's job dictates hours of indoor meetings.

He's also known for his sense of humor.

"The great thing is we can laugh about ourselves," said Barbara Manzo, deputy parks and recreation director, who has worked alongside Yarbrough for 15 years. "If we can't have a good time, how do you have the public have a good time?"

While having fun, the Manzo-Yarbrough leadership team has made a name for Lee County Parks and Recreation.

The department received the prestigious status of being accredited by the Commission for Accreditation of Parks and Recreation Agencies in 2001, and it has continued its successful reaccreditation. In 2007, the Florida Recreation and Parks Association awarded the department its highest honor, the Agency Excellence Award. It also garnered three other statewide awards last year. This year, Lee County Parks and Recreation was short-listed in the competition for a World Leisure Innovation Prize.

"Simply put, John Yarbrough is the best," Lee County Manager Don Stilwell said. "He's created parks that will be enjoyed forever by future generations, parks so splendid that our grandchildren and their grandchildren will hardly be able to conceive that it could have been done with such vision. Enjoying a day at any one of these fine facilities is a direct reflection of what JY has done for our community."

Although Yarbrough says he's proud of the parks and facilities, he said his biggest accomplishment is assembling a team of people. He's

proud of their work ethic and customer service.

"It's our staff and them 'getting it' that provides an important function for the community," said Yarbrough, who called his staff "passionate." "We take seriously the fact that people plan their lives and family time around recreating and using our facilities, be it a rec center or little league field. We are part of their lives."

That's a different atmosphere than the one he grew up in. He recalls a very short tourist season, a very unpopulated county and not much to do other than playing baseball, fishing or going to the beach.

The son of a nurse and a city of Fort Myers water and sewer superintendent, Yarbrough graduated from Fort Myers High School and then University of Tampa. His degree in criminology took him to state employment in the probation and parole arena. But he tired of the state bureaucracy and ended up working for the Kansas City Royals' farm team, which played at Terry Park. He met some Lee County staffers and the rest is history.

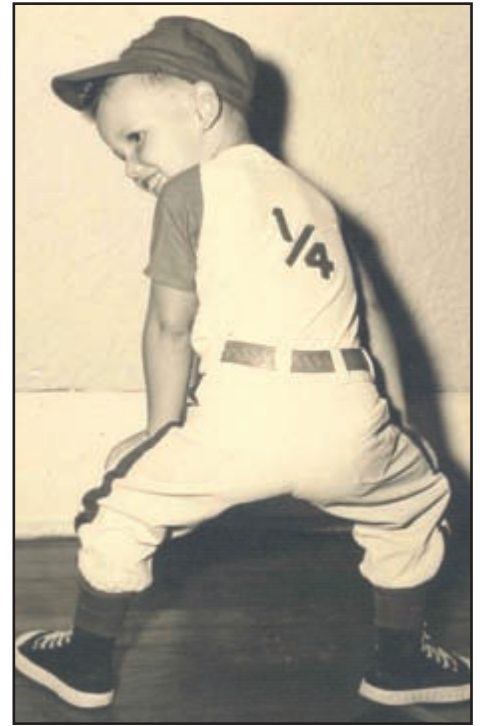
Besides leading Parks and Recreation, he raised his family in it.

His two sons from his first marriage — Jon and Casey, both in their 30s — have careers as a golf pro and an entrepreneur, respectively. His daughter, Ali, 14, is a freshman at Bishop Verot High School and a well-known youth sailor. His wife of 16 years, Damien Lin, is an avid outdoors woman. His retirement plans include devoting more time to the Estero yard they share and also to attending Ali's regattas.

Among his favorite places within the parks system are Six Mile Cypress Slough Preserve ("I'm always amazed at the number of people I meet in Lee County who never have been to Six Mile," he said) as well as Lakes Regional



John Yarbrough



COURTESY PHOTO

Yarbrough as a young ballplayer in Lee County in the 1950s.

Park and several beach parks, including Bonita Beach, Bowditch Point Regional Park and San Carlos Bay/Bunche Beach Preserve. His newest to the "favorites" list: Caloosahatchee Creeks Preserve, a 1,300-acre Conservation 20/20 property in North Fort Myers that opened earlier this year.

Such preserves were unheard of when he started at the parks department in 1979, when only 30 to 40 people worked there. Back then, he knew everyone's name and his colleagues felt like family. Even now, despite the department's larger size, the rec centers, baseball fields and parks are staffed by people he considers close. "Parks and Rec is still like a family," he said.

Perhaps that will be his legacy. His commitment to those who work for him and theirs to him.

"He's created a great staff," said D.J. "Petro" Petrucci, a citizen member of the Lee County Parks and Recreation Advisory Board since 1985. "I hate to see him leave, but the staff he has trained will be able to carry out the plans he has laid." ■

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