

Facility Specialist Says Goodbye

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By Rachel Stuart

From one recreation center to the next, Mike Touchette has made quite an impression over the past 12 years in The Villages.

After retiring and moving from Rhode Island to The Villages with his wife in 2005, Touchette wasn't ready to give up work quite yet.

"I decided to try recreation," said the Village of Sunset Pointe resident.



Touchette began working at Savannah Center as a recreation assistant, and then moved to Colony Cottage Recreation Center to help open it and work as a facility specialist, where he stayed for six and a half years.

Once SeaBreeze Recreation Center opened, John Rohan, director of recreation and executive golf for the Village Community Development Districts, encouraged Touchette to work as a facility specialist at both SeaBreeze and Colony Cottage.

After a few months, Rohan asked Touchette if he would mind moving to Eisenhower Recreation Center and helping with its opening, which he did.

Finally, the same question was asked when Rohan Recreation Center was built in October 2015, and Touchette's response, "most definitely," landed him a spot as a facility specialist until he was ready to retire.

As a facility specialist, Touchette stepped in to help when the recreation director was unavailable.

The job is a part-time, shared position, and Touchette personally trained his partner, Mike Schonewolf, when the recreation center first opened.

With about five employees named "Mike" at the time, Touchette has since gone by the nickname "Papa Mike," and Schonewolf goes by "Coach Mike" because he was a football coach in Delaware.

"Mike was new to The Villages when he applied to the job, and I was kind of leery on training him," Touchette said. "He turned out to be one of the best – if not the best – trainees I have had here in The Villages."

Schonewolf, of the Village of Country Club Hills, said everyone at Rohan has had a chance to work with and be trained by Touchette.

"The knowledge that he has about how recreation centers operate is incredible," he said. "We're all going to miss that knowledge, but more importantly, we're all going to miss Mike as a human being because he's a great guy."

Though it will be an adjustment to keep Rohan going without him, Schonewolf is up for the challenge.

"Anytime you have somebody of his level of expertise who leaves, you're going to have a little kink in the armor," he said. "But your job is to keep right on going, and that's what we'll do."

Touchette said Schonewolf will be the backbone of the position until the new replacement, Joyce Veneruso, gets situated.

Veneruso, of the Village of Buttonwood, was a recreation service representative based at Rohan, and she started working in her new position this week.

"I will miss his guidance the most, and his wealth of knowledge," she said. "I won't disappoint him. I have big shoes to fill."

Recreation Assistant Ed Daly, who has been at the recreation center since it opened, also said he will miss Touchette's knowledge.

"I think he was the best facility specialist in The Villages," said the Village of Osceola Hills resident. "He's a very easy guy to work for. He knew his job very well. When I came here, I knew nothing. He was a good teacher."

During his time as a facility specialist, Touchette also has helped everyone not only at his recreation center, but others as well.

Along with other employees, Touchette trains all new hires, and he also holds training sessions about the audio and visual equipment at each recreation center.

"It's pretty important. That's always fueled me. I love doing that," he said.

Whether it was teaching others how to improve in their job or creating relationships with the clubs, Touchette said it's the staff that he will miss the most.

"The staff here at Rohan has turned out to be one of the best I've worked with anywhere," he said.

The one accomplishment that Touchette is most proud of is the staff at Rohan receiving the Award of Excellence about one month ago.

Touchette was part of the staff that received the award at both Colony Cottage and Eisenhower, and his goal when Rohan first opened was to win the award.

"After a staff meeting one day, I said, 'This is what I want to try to do before I step back,'" he recalled. "That was my goal, to get that Award of Excellence, and we achieved that."

Now that Touchette has been officially retired for almost one week, he is ready to plan some quality time with his family and get back into golfing.

"It's time to live the lifestyle we all love so much," he said.