



Photos: Emotional groundbreaking for Union Beach playground memorializing Newtown victim Jack Pinto



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[UNION BEACH](#) – A community still reeling from destruction caused by Hurricane Sandy took a break from its own worries Friday morning to remember the life of a child they never met.

Hundreds of borough residents, many wearing blue sweatshirts signifying they were Hurricane Sandy survivors, attended an emotional groundbreaking ceremony at Fireman's Park for a playground dedicated to the memory of 6-year-old Jack Pinto – one of the 26 victims of the Sandy Hook Elementary School shootings.

The playground is the second of 26 living memorials – one for each of the Newtown victims – that [will be built in Sandy-ravaged towns and Newtown](#), as part of the New Jersey State Firefighters Mutual Benevolent Association's Sandy Ground 26, Where Angels Play Project.

"This program is just another beautiful step on the way to restoration, rebirth, healing and hope," said William Lavin, president of the NJ FMBA. "We endeavor to rebuild the coastline and our communities here in New Jersey, New York and Connecticut, while we honor and pay tribute to the beautiful lives of Newtown, Connecticut. And today is a very special celebration of the beautiful life of Jack Pinto."

A ribbon cutting for the project's first playground, built in Sea Bright in memory of faculty member Anne Marie Murphy, is scheduled for Saturday.

Friday morning's tearful groundbreaking ceremony included comments from elected officials, organizers and members of Pinto's family. And prior to Jack's older brother Ben, who was named the project's honorary foreman, helping to drill the first hole in the ground, Union Beach school students read the names of all 26 of the Newtown victims and released white, dove-shaped balloons in their memory.

"When we first learned of the Sandy Ground Project, it was of those things that we realized was exactly the type of thing that would've make Jack proud. Not only his love for play and playgrounds, but helping other

people,” said Dean Pinto, Jack’s father. “What we found in the lessons we’ve learned over the past few months is that the best way to heal ourselves is to focus on helping to heal others and that has been a great comfort to us.”

State Senator Joe Kyrillos, R-Monmouth, said the construction of the playground spoke to the character of Union Beach and the entire Sandy-ravaged Bayshore.

“It took a lot, but it has absorbed it and it’s coming back. But no matter how hard people took it, they still look out for the other person. They still worry about the next town over, or the next neighbor over, who may have had it a little bit harder,” Kyrillos said before turning his attention to the Pinto family. “We want you to know that you’re not alone. You’ll never forget your loss, but we’ll never forget your loss either.”

Carl Williamson, lead evangelist for the Gateway Church of Christ in Holmdel, said even though Union Beach residents were going through their own hardships following Hurricane Sandy, they were heartbroken even more to learn of the Sandy Hook Elementary School shootings.

“This place is where we can come together forevermore, knowing that as we play with our children we can tell them to story of Jack Pinto and we can tell them of the mold in our homes and of the walls that were torn town,” Williamson said of the playground. “And we can play, and we can laugh and we can move forward, because we are teaching them a lesson of life, of how to love through tragedy.”

The RAINE Foundation, which focuses on helping area children and families in crisis, partnered with the NJ FMBA on the playground project.

Patti Dickens, founder of the RAINE Foundation, said the Sandy Hook Elementary School shootings put the “devastation, destruction and despair” that Union Beach residents were dealing with into perspective.

“(The Pinto family) faced every parent’s worst nightmare when they lost their son Jack Pinto in the devastating acts in Sandy Hook Elementary School. There’s nothing harder than losing a child. And as we heard the news of that event, we all paused a moment and thought about how our issues are really kind of small and realized it could have been worse,” Dickens said. “Jack Pinto will never be forgotten. For Jack Pinto, we built a lasting memorial, a permanent structure that will be here forever.”

In addition to the playground, Dickens said Union Beach children would be providing their handprints to a memorial wall in the park that will also have a handprint from Jack Pinto, which was provided by his family.

“This way we’ll always be able to touch Jack’s hand,” Dickens said.

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