



A unique family, a secret project, an unshakable bond, a generous gift:
That's Jazz on the Pond.

Love and Jazz

PHOTOS PROVIDED

(From left) Kevin Chokan, Jeffrey Osborne, Shannon Pearson, Everette Harp and Eastman graduates Mike Cottone and Sean Joseph tear it up at last year's concert.

The setting itself, on lesser-known Cranberry Pond in Hilton, helps create the vibe of the annual fundraiser.

by Pam Sherman

Imagine you're under a party tent on a beautiful summer night, the stars twinkling in the water next to you as you listen to R&B legend Jeffrey Osborne—only Osborne isn't down in a huge arena. He's right next to you, amid the intimate crowd of friends and family.

Imagine you're an Eastman School of Music student and you get to play with your jazz idols and receive a scholarship, all because of this same concert. And imagine this concert is going on in your friend's backyard—just a “regular guy” and his family who had an unusual idea and the drive to pull it off.

The Belasco Family Foundation has been producing Jazz on the Pond every

July on Cranberry Pond in Hilton since 2007. As one family friend describes it, the event is part family reunion, part block party, part fundraiser and always a great jazz concert. But if many people gain from the Belasco family's generosity, it's the family itself that gets something invaluable. Jazz on the Pond is really the story of five siblings who lost their indomitable mother too early in life but remained determined to keep alive their deep emotional connection with each other.

The siblings remember their mother, Doris Belasco, filling the family home in Greece with laughter and love. Even while raising her own five children as a single mother and working to support her family, Belasco took in one of her daughter's high school classmates so the girl could finish

her senior year when her parents moved to Colorado. This was the house where people in the neighborhood wanted to hang out.

It was 29 years ago that Doris was diagnosed with colon cancer. She died just five months later. David Belasco, the youngest of the five siblings, was a junior in high school at the time. The three oldest sisters—Jackie, Jill and Donna—had already moved out, but Jackie moved back in to care for her younger brothers. That same year, the family home was severely damaged by fire.

But the family got by. David graduated in 1982 and earned a scholarship to the University of Southern California (USC) in Los Angeles, where sister Jill was living. She “took over the job of taking care of me,” David says.

The other siblings—Doug, Jackie and Donna—stayed in Rochester. David eventually practiced law in Los Angeles and became an entrepreneur, building a business then selling it a few years ago; he now teaches at USC. Jill also became an entrepreneur, sold her company and now is CEO of the U.S. division of Maesa Group, a French company.

Jackie says that even though her mother tasked her, the oldest, with taking care of her siblings, “We all take care of each other.” And that includes nieces and nephews.

Which leads to the “cottage” on Cranberry Pond. At the time of her death, Doris Belasco had owned an old bungalow on Lake Ontario, which the family was fixing up. Twenty years later, David was

visiting Rochester when a friend took him to see a condemned property on Cranberry Pond, between Long Pond and Braddock Bay. He drove by on his way to the airport and promptly fell in love with the secluded waterfront property. He decided to take a leap and put in an offer on the house, contingent on the sellers accepting by the time his plane landed in L.A. They did.

Next he tore down the decaying house and hired Rochester architect James Fahy to design a new one. But he proceeded in secret, without telling his siblings. He asked Mark Sofia, a childhood friend, to watch the progress (and keep the secret).

The result: A 4,000-square-foot Extreme Pond Makeover. When it was done, in 2001, David asked his Rochester sisters and their families to meet him at

a house on Cranberry Pond to look at a boat he was thinking of buying. Jackie says, “Even though we knew nothing about boats, we did as he asked—because that is what you do.”

They rang the doorbell, and to their surprise, David answered and said, “Welcome to your summer cottage. This is your house.” Jackie didn't quite believe the gorgeous, fully decorated house was theirs until she saw black-and-white photos on the wall—pictures of their mother with her children. Jackie burst into tears.

Jill says the house has become the place for family retreats and celebrations. They use the term “family” loosely.

“We don't have a lot of relatives, so our family feeling extends to our friends,” she explains.



PHOTOS PROVIDED

Jazz pro Everette Harp and Eastman graduate Mike Cottone (on trumpet): Part of the uniqueness of the concert is the opportunity for students to perform with jazz greats. Some guests pull up by boat to partake of the festivities.

Naturally, when David threw a summer party in 2007 and invited his friends the Mambo Kings to play on his porch, the guest list was huge. David always envisioned that, like George Eastman, he would one day bring great musicians to play at his home. Jackie says the family has no musical talent ("My mother always sang one beat behind the radio."), but they all love jazz.

When David wanted to expand the event the next year, Jackie suggested they use the event to raise money for a student. So David cold-called the Eastman School, only to discover that Doug Lowry, dean of Eastman, was a fellow USC graduate who also taught there for years. A scholarship was born.

That year, they booked legendary saxophonist Everette Harp (who has toured with Anita Baker and performed or recorded with dozens of musicians, including Herbie Hancock and Gladys Knight). The family covers the cost of producing the concerts, with all ticket proceeds going to the scholarship fund. The general public is invited, but Belasco family and friends make up much of the audience—along with neighbors, who often just glide over in boats to listen.

David writes into every performer's contract that the Eastman students be allowed to play a song or two with them. In 2009, several students got to share the stage with Everette Harp and Jeffrey Osborne.

In two years, the fundraiser has raised approximately \$30,000. The family wants to keep the intimate feeling of the concert—and the backyard is only so big, says Jackie—so this year they're adding sponsorships and premium tickets to try to raise the take.

Lowry, the Eastman dean, is grateful for the donation and is also moved by the family's dedication to each other. "This is a unique family event, tethered by family values," he says. "It just happens to involve jazz."

In keeping with that family feeling, the Belascos don't just give to the scholarship fund; they cultivate the young talent beyond the event. At the 2008 concert, the Belascos befriended Eastman student



PHOTOS BY MATT WITTMAYER

Old photos hung at the cottage show the siblings' late mother, Doris. (Right) Donna (Belasco) Pratt and Jackie Belasco Stone on the house's porch.

Mike Cottone. The family stayed in touch with Cottone when he moved to New York to attend Julliard, even letting him stay in Jill's apartment. Cottone is amazed by how much interest they've taken in him.

"The music industry can be a dark place, and to have someone with their energy pay attention is so motivating," he says. That, and playing in concert with his music idols.

The event itself is a family affair. Jackie's husband provides the catering, cousins take tickets, nephews drive the talent from place to place. And when it comes time to party, everyone takes part—even Donna, the "quiet sister," who shocked everyone last year by taking Jeffrey Osborne's face into her hands and kissing him on the lips.

"It's a lot of work and not cheap to put

on a concert of this size, and at times I've wondered if it's worth it," David says. "But seeing my sisters dancing like teenagers—hands over their heads, laughing and singing—is priceless. And if our mother were alive, she would be dancing and singing with them."

Pam Sherman writes the Suburban Outlaw column for Rochester Magazine.

This year: the Chaka show

David Belasco recently heard Chaka Kahn perform, then called his sister Jackie and quoted from the movie Jaws: "We're going to need a bigger boat."

Kahn will perform at this year's Jazz on the Pond concert along with trumpet player Rick Braun, an Eastman School graduate who has toured with the likes of Tina Turner and Tom Petty. The event runs from 3 to 8 p.m. July 10. Tickets include a buffet dinner and beer, wine, soda and bottled water.

Tickets are \$80, or \$50 for those under age 30. Premium tickets (\$125) get preferred seating in rows three to seven. For more information, visit www.jazzonthepond.org.



Donna (Belasco) Pratt, David Belasco, Jill Belasco and Jackie Belasco Stone: siblings happily together at the party. Jill and Jeffrey Osborne share a soulful moment at last year's concert.

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