

Richmond Times-Dispatch BUSINESS

ARC's voice to be couple who've been 'in trenches'

BY BOB RAYNER

TIMES-DISPATCH STAFF WRITER

Joe and April Niamtu look like regular parents. But they are, by any measure, extraordinary.

They're about to give a big boost to an organization that helped them—and thousands of other parents whose children require much more than ordinary time and attention.

The day that changed the Niamtus' lives began normally enough. He was fishing in the James River. She was home taking care of their first son, Joey, just 4 months old.

Joe, a well-known local cosmetic facial surgeon, got a call from his wife: "Come home quick. Something's wrong."

When he got there, Joey had a seizure and was turning blue. He suffered another at the hospital. The little boy's heart stopped, and his dad helped the other doctors revive him.

"It was a little panicky time," Joe said.

More hard times were on the way.

The Niamtus soon learned that their son, who is now 5½, had cerebral palsy with severe developmental delays.

Two years later, their second son, Evan, was born with—against all odds—the same conditions as his brother.

Both boys receive all of their nutrition through a tube.

"Neither of them can do anything independently," April said. "They are 100 percent dependent on their caregivers."

The boys cannot walk or talk. But they are well-loved.

"Our house has become a small hospital in some respects," according to Joe, who has donated his time and skills to perform numerous facial reconstruction operations on children who live in underdeveloped countries.

Now the Niamtus are ready to go public for the group that helped their own children. Tonight, the couple will be named official spokespeople for the Association for Retarded Citizens, better known as The Greater Richmond ARC.

Joe will speak at the group's annual Ladybug Fundraiser. Starting next month, he'll appear in a television commercial promoting the group.



THOMAS DANIEL

Joe and April Niamtu, with sons Joey and Evan, will serve as official spokespeople for the Greater Richmond Association for Retarded Citizens, better known as ARC.

The 30-second spot, created by Neathawk Dubuque & Packett, a local ad agency, will run on Comcast Cable and WWBT-Channel 12.

Doug Payne, ARC's marketing director, said the Niamtus are the ideal folks to spread the word for the nonprofit, which provides infant and child development, day care, after-school and vocational services for children and adults with retardation and developmental disabilities. It also runs Camp Baker in Chesterfield County.

"The fact that they have two boys who went through our programs—the stars just aligned," he said. "They've been right there in the trenches with the other parents."

The couple's commitment to ARC is easy to see.

When they began to understand their sons' disability, the Niamtus were initially baffled about what to do next, even though Joe's been a physician for more than two decades.

"At the end of the day, you've got to do something," he said. "When your house is on fire, you call 911. With this, who do you call?"

Turns out, you call ARC.

"I don't know what we would have done without them," April said. "Their staff is incredible. Everyone there wants your child to achieve everything they can."

Joe nodded his head. "Calling ARC is like calling the Marines. You get battalions and divisions."

It's not just the services the group provides.

"ARC is a family of its own," Joe said.

"Meeting other parents with special-needs children is an important part of it."

April grabs a tissue to wipe away a few tears as she listens to her husband talk about ARC.

They plan to do a lot of talking this year. More tears will be shed.

"Your child will never be able to taste ice cream or ride a bike or score a soccer goal," Joe said. "Your goal on this planet is to make this child's life as good as it can be. If I get my son to look me in the eye and smile, that's my soccer goal."

The Niamtus aim to boost awareness about ARC, raise money and lure more corporate sponsors.

"If there wasn't an organization like ARC to help you, you'd have to reinvent the wheel and it would be overwhelming," Joe said.

"There are so many things that my sons cannot and will not ever be able to do on their own.

"Unfortunately the list is endless, but there is actually something that my boys can do. They have the ability to influence and help other families by increasing the community awareness of ARC."

■ Contact staff writer Bob Rayner at brayner@timesdispatch.com or (804) 649-6073.