

TALKING WITH BILL BEVINS:**Q&A: Joe and April Niamtu**

Their own special needs children inspire charitable work

By Bill Bevins



Dr. Joe Niamtu II is known internationally in the field of cosmetic facial surgery – and on local TV through his commercials. But Niamtu, a then-dashing bachelor who came to Richmond in 1979, and his wife April are also known for their commitment to charitable causes. The Niamtus have two sons, both special needs children with cerebral palsy.

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**BILL: JOE, DO YOU REMEMBER THE FIRST TIME WE MET?**

JOE: I would say that the first time we met probably had something to do with a bar, a beer and a band. ...

BILL: WELL, ACTUALLY, YOU'RE RIGHT.

JOE: ... and a babe. [LAUGHS]

BILL: YOU'RE ABSOLUTELY RIGHT. IT WAS AT A PARTY AT YOUR HOUSE. THE FRIEND THAT TOOK ME SAID, 'YOU GOT TO MEET THIS GUY, JOE. HE'S KIND OF LIKE THE MOST ELIGIBLE BACHELOR IN RICHMOND.' WHAT IS THE PROGRESSION FROM JOE, MOST ELIGIBLE BACHELOR, TO A PILLAR OF THE COMMUNITY?

Joe: When you move to a place, you're living in an apartment and you're running around with young friends and having fun

and meeting people, but then, as you get on a little bit, you've got to start doing something. And those people that we run around with – a good example is you and I at the party – you just start networking, and I've been real lucky that I've done well with my business. I feel a big need to repay this community.

BILL: YOU HAVE BEEN A HUGE INFLUENCE ON JOE AS HIS WIFE, APRIL. TELL US A LITTLE BIT ABOUT WHAT LIFE IS LIKE...

April: It's very exciting. I have a great husband, I have a great home and I have three wonderful –children. However, both my younger two are totally disabled. But they give me a lot of love and a lot of enjoyment in my life. It comes with a lot of work, but they're worth it.

BILL: JOE, YOU WROTE AN ARTICLE IN THE PAPER ABOUT BEING THE DAD OF CHILDREN WHO ARE TOTALLY DISABLED AND, IN SPITE OF THAT, THE LOVE YOU GET FROM THEM. TELL US HOW THAT HAS AFFECTED YOUR LIFE.

Joe: I've done a lot of hard things but nothing has ever, ever, ever been harder than fathering two totally handicapped children. When my first son was born – neither April or I have any family –history of any of this – it was the happiest day of my life. You bring the child home and you're getting ready, you're starting to buy footballs and crazy things that they can't use yet. At about three months, Joey started having seizures and we went to the hospital and found out that he was never going to be normal – probably never going to walk or talk – and he would be dependent. So we had a lot of genetic testing done and they couldn't find anything. They said this was just a fluke. In any event, my second son, Evan, was born with the same thing, despite the intensive testing. On a typical morning, I go in and I hug my boys. They can't say, 'Daddy,' and I'll never hear that word. They look like normal children, but they can't walk or talk. There are a lot of special needs parents out there. Nobody is tougher than those people. It's a special love that you have. There are things about having special children that the average person will never experience – the depth of that level of love. But there's a lot of frustration. They're not able to communicate with you, and it's just a tough thing, Billy. It's hard to describe. We try to make a loving, caring environment for these boys and also try to take our –experience and help other families.

BILL: APRIL, I WANT YOU TO PICK UP THERE. I KNOW BOTH OF YOU HAVE GOTTEN HEAVILY INVOLVED IN THIS CAUSE AND DIFFERENT CHARITIES.

April: One of the first organizations that we did was Noah's Children, and we co-chaired an event with [former football star] Jim Kelly, and that was extremely successful. And then within another six months or so, I was so involved with ARC. It's the Greater Richmond ARC, which is the Association for Retarded Citizens, but I like to refer to it as Always Responding with Compassion. I have been involved with creating the Ladybug Wine Tasting auction part of it and keeping that whole event alive with Thom Horsey and so many other people – great team members – and we've raised hundreds of thousands of dollars annually to help children with disabilities. ARC works with people from the cradle to the grave – the infant intervention program, before and after school, and all kinds of therapy: occupational therapy, physical therapy, vision therapy. They help with vocational skills, [too]. We've also tried to [support] Positive Vibe Café and Safe Harbor for domestic violence victims. Joe and I are going to chair an event for the March of Dimes in – October, another great event that goes after prenatal care.

BILL: PEOPLE LOOK AT SUCCESSFUL FOLKS AND THINK THAT EVERYTHING'S A DREAM. THANK YOU BOTH FOR TAKING A MOMENT TO TALK WITH US – AND KEEP UP THE GOOD WORK.

JOE: Have a great day, man.

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