

**SUNDAY
BREAKFAST**

FRANK MARIANI KEEPS
LANDSCAPING FIRM IN
GROWTH MODE.

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SOCIALS

CHICAGO BOTANIC
GARDEN BENEFIT
FEATURES THOU-
SANDS OF ORCHIDS.

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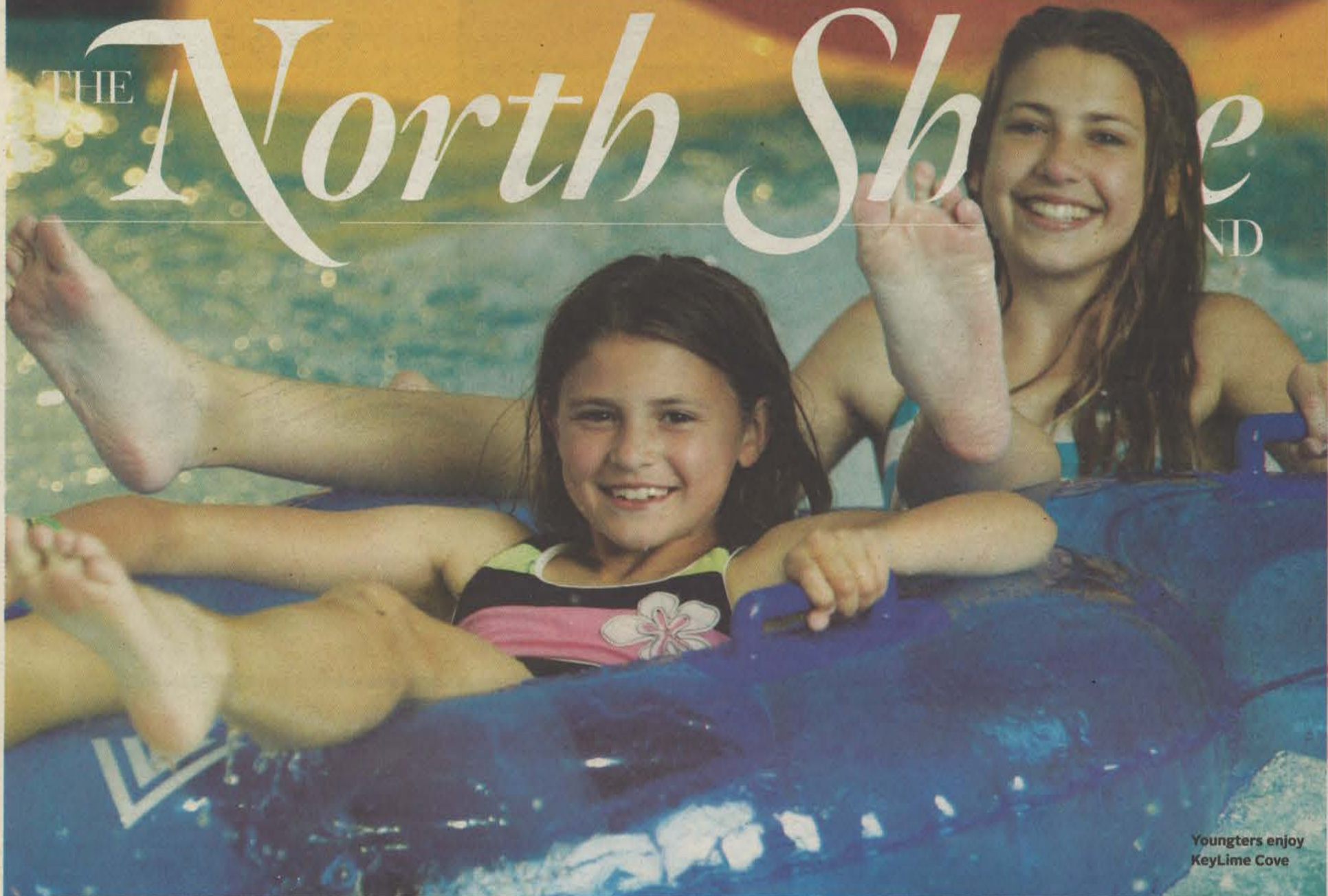
**STANDOUT
STUDENT**

WRITING LIFE APPEALS
TO WOODLANDS
ACADEMY JUNIOR.

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LOCAL NEWS AND PERSONALITIES OF WILMETTE, KENILWORTH, WINNETKA, NORTHFIELD, GLENCOE, HIGHLAND PARK, EVANSTON, LAKE FOREST, METTAWA & LAKE BLUFF



Youngsters enjoy
KeyLime Cove

SPLASH INTO SPRING

■ BY BILL MCLEAN

Not everybody along the North Shore is packing suntan lotion and light clothes in anticipation of spring break this month.

Some families do stick around these parts when school is out — and they find ways to escape the clutches of cabin fever.

Here are eight options, in no particular order, for local residents who prefer to get behind the wheel of a car rather than a pilot during spring break:

Maple Syrup Hikes, Edward L. Ryerson Conservation Area in Riverwoods, March 22, beginning with one at 12:30 p.m. The last hour-long hike starts at 3:30 p.m.

Hikers of all ages get to learn how trees work and about the sweet sap of sugar maples.

"It's a great thing for the whole family to do," says Jen Berlinghof, an environmental educator for the Lake County Forest Preserve. "When people think of syrup, most usually think of New England, Vermont. But it's a part of our culture here in Lake County."

Typically 25-30 people drill, capture sap

in buckets, boil and taste-test.

"The middle school-aged kids know the science end of it," Berlinghof added. "The parents, they're the ones who say, 'Oh, I remember learning about that in school.'"

Cost is \$6 per child and per adult. Call (847) 968-3321 to register.

Pop-up Adventure Playground, at Crow Island Woods in Winnetka, March 29, 11 a.m.-3 p.m.

It's free and it's a unique, public celebration of a child-directed play. The play workers transform the Woods into an inspiring play environment using loose parts (e.g. cardboard boxes, string, tape).

The adventure play is sponsored by the Winnetka Park District, The Alliance for Early Childhood, and Meatheads Burgers and Fries.

KeyLime Cove, an indoor waterpark resort in Gurnee.

It's not just a water park with slides and wave and activity pools. The facility also features an arcade with the latest games, bowling lanes, two sit-down restaurants and several retail shops.

"We get a lot of visitors from the North Shore this time of year," says KeyLime Cove general manager and former Highland Park resident Dale McFarland. "We focus on

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SUNDAY BREAKFAST | He understands the lay of the land

■ BY DAVID SWEET

After he graduated from high school, Frank Mariani's life veered far from the typical teenager's.

Within 18 months, his father Vito — founder of Mariani Landscaping — was dead at 45 of leukemia. He willed himself to live longer than doctors had predicted, Frank said, to show his eldest of five sons how to operate his landscape maintenance business, which featured nine employees and \$90,000 in annual sales.

"I knew if we were going to eat, and survive, I needed to learn the business quickly," Mariani says. "It was really more fear of failure that drove me. Most of our competitors thought I was going to fail. I got my sights set on doing it better than anyone else."

Just over 40 years later, Mariani Landscape is a behemoth on the North Shore. More than 400 employees (called associates) work at the business, which brings in tens of millions of dollars in revenue annually. Expanding into landscape design and installation, it has recruited and kept hundreds of new clients.

"Why do I still like going to work after 40 years? Because I still think our next project will be our best one."

| Frank Mariani

"My father was well-respected and much-loved. But being a landscape maintenance firm wasn't really a glamorous profession," says Mariani, sitting behind his desk in a small office at the Lake Bluff headquarters. "I wanted to raise the bar to let people know it's a noble profession. We're making a homeowner's life better."

From houses in Lake Geneva to the evening island at the Chicago Botanic Garden to roof decks in the city, Mariani's imprint has grown substantially. The quinquagenarian chief executive officer is not on site daily for every project, but he'll drive around on Sundays looking at Mariani's work and the competition's and ask himself,

"Are we in the lead or not?" He offers critiques on every project the company designs — and even awards it captures.

"One year after we won for a design at the Chicago Flower & Garden Show, I texted a message to our team congratulating them — but also told them 10 things I would have done differently," he says. "They understood."

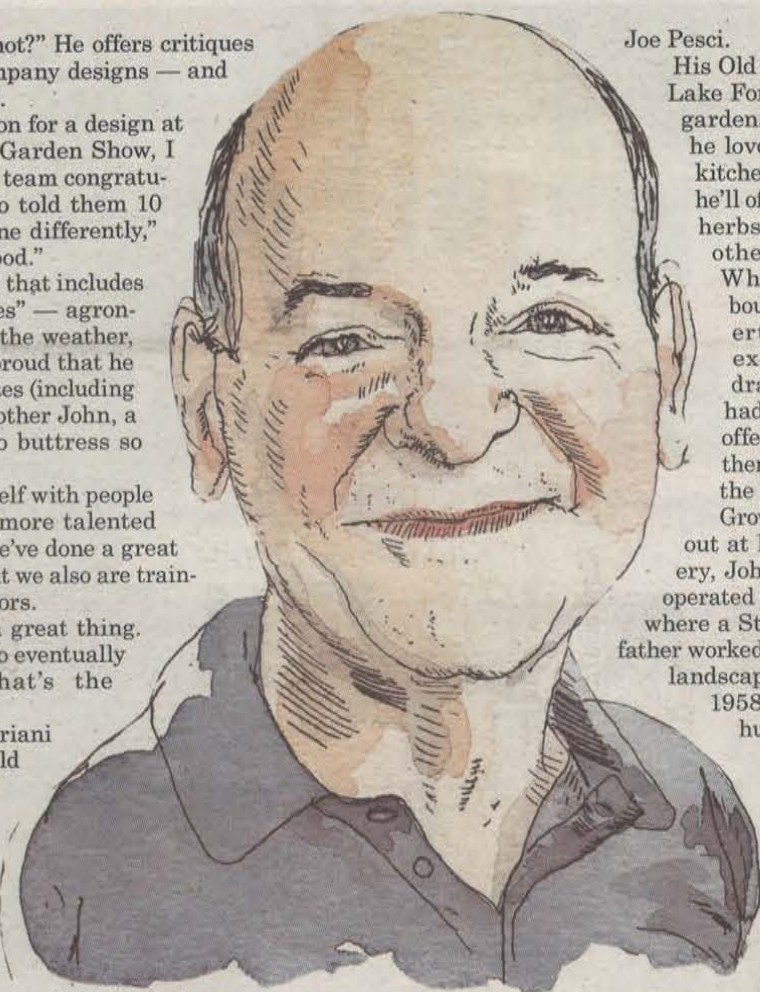
In a complex business that includes "a million moving pieces" — agronomy, immigration, and the weather, to name a few — he is proud that he can count on his associates (including relatives such as his brother John, a landscape architect) to buttress so many areas.

"I've surrounded myself with people who are brighter and more talented than I am," he says. "We've done a great job of training people, but we also are training our future competitors."

"But competition is a great thing. If we're helping people to eventually start businesses, that's the American way."

Fifteen years ago, Mariani tried to ensure he would be around well into the 21st century to compete. Overweight, he changed his lifestyle and now spends 30-45 minutes every day on the elliptical machine. At lunch, if he doesn't have an appointment, he'll head over to Middlefork Savanna, operated by Lake Forest Open Lands, and walk for an hour.

"It's better than eating a cheeseburger," says Mariani, a devoted golfer who has played with Rudy Guliani and



Frank Mariani

Joe Pesci.

His Old Mill Farm property in Lake Forest features extensive gardens in season and, since he loves to cook (an outdoor kitchen was added last fall), he'll often pick vegetables and herbs outdoors and gather other necessary fare at Whole Foods. After he bought the run-down property in 1986, he was excited to find plans drawn by a landscaper he had studied, Jens Jensen, offering his visions for the then-countless acres during the 1930s.

Growing up, Mariani helped out at his grandfather's nursery, John Fiore & Sons, which operated west of Waukegan Road where a Starbucks sits today (his father worked there until opening his landscape maintenance firm in 1958). A fan of football and hunting when he attended Deerfield High School, he had dreams of attending college. Though that never happened, the alternative has provided a priceless education.

"I really don't fall in love with houses and gardens. I fall in love with doing the project," he says. "Why do I still like going to work after 40 years? Because I still think our next project will be our best one." ■

ILLUSTRATION BY BARRY BLITT



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