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Yehudi Gaffen, project manager

Yehudi Gaffen's job in the Great Park design team is to make sure it doesn't become a "set of dusty plans on someone's bookshelf."

BY SONYA SMITH
IRVINE WORLD NEWS
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Editor's note: Look for profiles of other main Great Park designers in the Irvine World News.

When it comes to the Great Park, Yehudi Gaffen's job is to make it happen.

With a group of creative people, such as Ken Smith, Mary Miss and Enrique Norten, the Great Park design team needs someone who can pull the individuals together, establish a creative environment and guide the process. And that difficult job is given to Gaffen.

Known as "Gaf," he is the stern one of the group and is always able to find the right words to describe the planning.

He does want to build a great park like the other designers, but his dream ending is unique.

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Gaffen was born in South Africa 53 years ago, even though he was supposed to be born in America.

His late father grew up in Lithuania, but when it was time to start a family he tried to escape to the United States. He stowed away in a ship labeled "USA." It was across the water that Gaffen's dad realized he traveled to the Union of South Africa, not America.

Gaffen grew up in the African country, and joined the army there. As he grew up, he always was amazed in how things were built – the planning, the constructing and the finished structures.

When he got out of the army, he went to a university in Cape Town, where he started right away in construction management. In that business he met Pam, and the two moved to the U.S. leaving behind the uncomfortable African heat.

He started out in California, working for various construction companies. He married Pam in 1980, and they had two children – Joshua, now 24, and Shayna, now 21.

Then one day Gaffen remembered back to his dad's independence and vision; he had never worked for anyone. So, Gaffen and Pam started a company out of their home – Gafcon was born.

Running his own company was a dream. Gaffen worked with the clients out in the field and his wife managed the paperwork back at home.

The company has managed projects that are as big and as costly as the Great Park. Take the Arrowhead golf course and community that was on 1,006 acres.

Gafcon managed the construction of an 18-hole golf course, 1,080 homes, a community center and an elementary school that required moving 2.5 million cubic yards of dirt.

But, the Great Park is a different project for everyone involved.

In this task, he's been with the design team since day one – allowing his firm to better understand and appreciate the master plan for the future task of building the park.

Gaffen says his job of guiding the abstract-thinking designers into one draft master plan is like herding cats. "But, its fun," he says with a laugh.

Sure, he says tempers can flare in what he calls an environment of "creative tension." He reminds the design team of what they're being asked to do – the opportunity they all have in creating the Great Park, and that brings everyone down to one level.

"It has its moments," he says. "Managing creativity is not like running a factory. The art is to somehow blend them all together."

But, throughout the process he guards the project – making sure it doesn't end up as "dusty plans on someone's bookshelf." Leadership, communication, execution are the keys he sees to the park's success.

So what does Gaffen want out of this beyond seeing it completed and having the finished piece set a new standard in public parks?

He wants to live on site.

"I want to bring my grandchildren and tell them I worked on the park," he said. "I want to live in a house in the park and retire here with my wife."

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Yehudi Gaffen is the project manager of the Great Park Design Team. Here, he leans against the huge sliding door of an old hanger on the former base. This structure, and several like it, will be preserved and incorporated into the Great Park.

Jeffrey Antenore, Irvine World News

YEHUDI GAFFEN

Age: 53

Lives in: San Diego and Los Angeles

Occupation: Construction manager

Family: Married to wife, Pam, for 26 years. Children are Joshua, 24, and Shayna, 21.