

A FATHER'S DAY TO REMEMBER

Contest winner gets backyard makeover

By David Hennessey
 dhennessey@bcnnew.com

Norwalk resident Richard Fuller will be receiving the Father's Day gift of a lifetime this weekend.

Fuller won the Gault Stone "Outdoor ManSpace" competition, which means he has a new decked out backyard hardscape, complete with a 20-by-20 foot stone patio, top-of-the-line grill, flower garden, new shrubbery, a Yoshino Cherry tree and Kousa Dogwood.

Ironically, he didn't even know he was entered in the contest.

"I had no idea my wife entered me in the contest. She doesn't tell me these things," said Fuller, a former Brien McMahon High School teacher and retired longtime director of the George Washington Carver Center who now works in the Bridgeport school system and in Norwalk as a teacher.

"When I started to see all the materials [that they were going to use to build the manspace], I began to get excited," added Fuller. "I am very much looking forward to it. It comes at a great time in my life."

To participate in the contest, open to Fairfield County residents and created by Westport-based Gault Stone, members of the public submitted essays on how much they deserve and would enjoy a "manspace."

According to Megan Smith, Gault's marketing director, the purpose of the contest was to create a scenario that supports "men who want to reclaim and create a part of the home" by making their own unique manspaces.

"We'd seen this trend in men making their manspaces in basements and

garages," Smith explained. "Then we asked ourselves if men would want to take it to the great outdoors. From what we've seen, men want to create a space they can reclaim, but also a space that is inclusive of the family. The hardscape is the ultimate Father's Day gift."

Once the concept for the competition was ironed out, contest judges Dickson DeMarche, a landscape architect with Wilton-based The Laurelrock Company, Norwalk mason Nick DiCostanzo and Matt Kolk, editor-in-chief of Fairfield County HOME magazine, began the task of filtering through more than 250 essay entries.

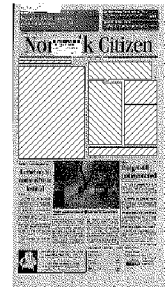
One, they found, was the clear winner.

See Manspace on A14

"It was especially poignant," DeMarche said of Fuller's winning essay, which was submitted by his wife Carolyn, his son Richard and his granddaughter Dominique Franklin.

"Rick's wife asking for [the hardscape] was kind of neat. She wasn't asking for a lot. She was straightforward and humble," added DeMarche, who designed the manspace.

"I would like my husband Richard to have a special manspace," Carolyn Fuller wrote. "Why, you ask? My husband has worked his whole life to mentor and encourage young people to be all they can be. Even after retire-



ment and illness he continues to work everyday at Central High School in Bridgeport helping students fulfill their dream of higher education. Every year he has a garden that he loves and nurtures. This garden is his own space in which he grows and nurtures plants as he does his students. We have a small backyard and we have tried for years to fix up the space there so we could cookout and have family over. It still looks so plain and tired! The ideal space would have a small patio area, concrete or wood in the corner where we could put an umbrella set and also an area for grilling which he enjoys the most. Not too close to the house, we've already seen the results of that! A small area for flowers would also be nice. Thank you for the opportunity to give you a small glimpse of a very special man, a man who has always been there for his family and others. As his wife and son, we know how much he deserves this "ManSpace" and we hope you can see in these few words what a special man he is."

"She wasn't asking for the world," DeMarche said. "She was just asking for a place for him to sit and relax. He deserves it."

"They kept it simple and didn't ask for much," added DiCostanzo, who crafted the manspace. "The other thing is that he's a teacher, and it's nice to give back to someone who gives so much."

"I think what the judging panel must have seen was that the essay was

extremely inspirational," Smith said. "They wanted to reward him for helping people. The decision was unanimous."

With DeMarche and DiCostanzo on-board, Gault, which prepared the site and donated materials, informed Fuller of his win in the competition and immediately began plans for constructing the manspace - valued at \$10,000 - at his 100 Stuart Ave. home.

DeMarche explained that while manspaces have cropped up in reclaimed storage areas of the home, like basements, garages, attics and even seldom-used out-structures on the property, there was always an unspoken rule that these private retreats were off limits to the rest of the family.

"But there is an important distinction when it comes to creating the outdoor manspace--the rest of family is always invited in," DeMarche said, adding that overall men seem to be taking a greater role in the design of the family's outdoor living spaces. "I've had many male clients immerse themselves in the design process as the dominant force."

In terms of the design of Fuller's manspace, DeMarche recognized the winner as an avid gardener and made a circular stone patio the focal point of the outdoor manspace, giving structure and a sense of permanence to his continually evolving garden.

"Stone lends a garden focus and provides the

perfect foil to plants," DeMarche explained in a statement about the project.

Of the nearly 200 entries received, most asked for a grill. A firepit for roasting marshmallows with the kids came in a close second, according to DeMarche. Other amenities, such as outdoor fireplaces and hot tubs were also popular wish list items.

A new grill was most important to Fuller, who often had to use three or four small grills to accommodate his large extended family. A Norwalk native, Fuller is the oldest of nine children, eight of whom still reside in the area. Norwalk's Aitoro Appliance donated Fuller's new grill, and DiCostanzo encased the grill in cultured stone.

"The grill is cultured stone with flagstone caps and countertops on both sides, and there is also a bar with high stools," DiCostanzo explained. He pointed out that the bar/grill combination has a particularly masculine look and feel to it and offers a unique spin on the traditional standalone grill and outdoor fireplace, which are popular amenities among his Fairfield County clients.

DeMarche said everyone has been working hard the past few weeks against the constant rain to finish Fuller's remodeled backyard in time for Father's Day.

"But everyone is behind it. It's a great project," he said.

Fuller said he is looking

forward to escaping to his backyard to relax, where he will enjoy the plantings from his patio.

“I’m into gardening. It’s my hobby. I like to see the fruits of my labor, and I like to talk to plants because they don’t talk back.”

For Fuller, it’s been a life of hard work and dedication to the youth of his community. He was recently recognized by the Carver Center with an award for his tireless efforts. Those efforts, though, are far from

finished.

“As long as there’s something to give and people who need it, I’ll always be there. You can always help,” he said.

And though he plans on spending Father’s Day relaxing in his new manspace with his family, Fuller said he will be using the patio as an inspirational setting to tutor children.

“In that way, I’ll be able to watch the growth of vines and the growth of minds,” he said.



Contributed photo

The Fuller’s backyard before winning the manspace contest. Richard Fuller used to have to use a few grills like the one depicted here to accommodate family parties.



Photo by **Nicole Rivard**

Carolyn and Richard Fuller of Norwalk bask in their new and improved backyard Monday. Behind them is a stone encased grill with flagstone bar. The completed "manspace" is going to be unveiled Saturday and featured in the July issue of *Fairfield County Home*.