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Art of Attractions | Coney Island Rising—and Taking New First Drops

Arthur Levine talks with Deno's Wonder Wheel Park about their newest addition, the "Phoenix" roller coaster

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Teddy Vourderis (left) and Deno "DJ" Vourderis on "Phoenix" at Deno's Wonder Wheel Park (Photo Credit: Deno's Wonder Wheel Park)

Let's hear it for family-owned and -operated parks and for the families that keep them going. Specifically, let's hear it for the Vourderis family.

Its family members have been keeping Deno's Wonder Wheel Park at New York's Coney Island going for decades. As with virtually all parks, however, they weren't allowed to open last year and remain closed for the entire 2020 season. That doesn't mean they weren't busy.

Despite losing the ability to generate any revenue and facing an unknown future amid the coronavirus pandemic, the family proceeded with plans to build a new roller coaster, the park's largest investment to date. Over the July Fourth weekend, just a few months after Coney Island's amusements were given the green light to welcome visitors again, Deno's debuted "Phoenix," a suspended family thrill coaster from Vekoma. It is a personal triumph for Deno "DJ" Vourderis, a third-generation member of the family.

When I asked Vourderis how long he had been planning the coaster, he replied, "Since I came out of the womb, I think." It's not much of an exaggeration. Growing up at the park, Vourderis says that he started going to IAAPA Expo and learning about the business before he began grade school. He had long wanted to bring a new and exciting attraction next to the iconic "Wonder Wheel." "There should be something special there," he says.

What he and his family brought is a custom coaster that is designed for a small, oddly shaped parcel of land. With a height of 68 feet, a top speed of 34 mph, and a 39-inch height requirement, "Phoenix" may not look too intimidating. But it packs a surprising, giddy punch as it whips passengers to and fro alongside Coney Island's West 12th Street, also known as Denos D. Vourderis Place in honor of the family's patriarch.

As its name suggests, "Phoenix" represents more than just a new ride. With the pandemic, Vourderis says that it felt like New York City was down and out. "We all needed some good news, something to look forward to." Now that people can visit the park, he says it's heartwarming to see them enjoy themselves and laugh again aboard the coaster. "It's actual real-life fun, and we need that more than ever."

Vourderis thinks the new ride and the “Wonder Wheel” share a unique bond. The famous wheel was built during the pandemic of 1918 and literally lifted people up after a difficult period. Similarly, “Phoenix” is helping people rise during the COVID-19 crisis. Building it and opening it now “felt like destiny in a way. I think both rides symbolize hope,” he says, adding that they will help the park bring joy and good times for the next 100 years.

People crave the kind of real-life fun that your parks and attractions provide—especially now. Realize the joy and healing you are bringing to a world that has been traumatized.

I’ll see you at the parks. I’ll be the one laughing giddily as I get whipped to and fro on the coaster.

- ▶ *A lifelong park fanatic, **Arthur Levine** has been writing newspaper and magazine travel features about the industry he loves since 1992. He’s been the Theme Parks Expert at TripSavvy.com (formerly About.com) since 2002, and is a regular contributor for USA Today.*



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