

It's "honors night" at the New Trier Township's 163rd Annual Town Meeting at the North Shore Senior Center.
FROM LEFT: Jerry Ginsburg, Mary Louise Schram, Phil Hoza, New Trier Township Supervisor Patricia Cantor, Lisa Axelrod, Mary Roth, and Barry Fleischer.
Not pictured: Brian Bredemann.



Seven special volunteers make the “honor roll” at New Trier Township’s Annual Town Meeting

BY PETER GIANOPULOS • PHOTOGRAPHY BY APRIL GRAVES

IT'S A TRADITION ALMOST AS OLD AS OUR TOWNSHIP ITSELF. Once a year, on the second Tuesday in April, New Trier Township holds the Annual Town Meeting, an open forum in which elected officials and the citizens of our community come together under one roof to measure the past and survey the future.

It's the essence of democracy. Elected officials provide reports. And special guest speakers (this year, Cook County Board President Toni Preckwinkle) offer insights. But it's the people — the registered voters of the community — who schedule the agenda items that are due for discussion.

That agenda sets the tone for the future, but it's the honoring, every year, of a small group of local citizens who've gone beyond the call of duty that symbolizes the hard work and achievements of the past. Individually, this year's award-winners have done everything from develop much-needed work programs for the developmentally disabled to cultivating the spirit of volunteerism in our youngest citizens. But collectively they represent the values and charitable spirit of our unique community.



Mary Louise Schram

WILMETTE

Superior Service to Persons with Disabilities Award

IMAGINE FOR A MOMENT THAT you are the parent of a child with developmental disabilities. In truth, all you really want for your child is a normal life, the same opportunities to work, spend time with friends, and learn new skills as everyone else, which is precisely what your son or daughter receives [in the structured world of grade school and high school.

And then, suddenly, they are 22 years of age. They graduate. And as you look around, you notice there are few daytime programs or activities in your area that cater to the particular needs of your child. That's when the difficult questions set in. How will they maintain their social and vocational skills? Will they have friends? Will they feel like they belong to the community as a whole?

Those were the worries rifling through the mind of Mary Louise Schram in 2008. What she didn't want was her son Derek whiling away the weeks, isolated and in front of a TV screen. She wanted him to be in a position where he could develop ongoing social relationships and valuable job skills. And as it turned out, so did other parents, including Sally Schiller and Jane Gallery, who began organizing potluck dinners (and then Saturday night socials at the Wilmette Recreation Center) to discuss the need for local services for young adults with developmental disabilities. Soon, a nonprofit organization to meet those needs, called Our Place of New Trier Township, was born.

In the three years since its inception, Schram has contributed her background in business to the overall management of the organization, spending upwards of 40 hours a week fundraising, developing program outcomes and cultivating community partnerships. Now more than 25 individuals with disabilities are involved in meaningful service jobs, from shelving DVDs at the Glencoe Library and organizing merchandise at the Winnetka Thrift Shop to managing the inventory at the New Trier Township Food Pantry.

"My goal," says Schram, "is to support in every way possible the creation of a sustainable organization whose purpose and focus is to allow my son to live a meaningful, productive life in his home community with family and friends."

So as much as the organization has already achieved — including the hiring of an executive director, William Johnson, to lead a new phase of growth — there is much more to do, which is why Schram is busy spreading the word about the organization's third fundraiser, Race Night at the Palio, which will take place from 6 to 9 p.m. on May 19 at the Takiff Center in Glencoe. Tickets are \$45 (\$50 at the door). Visit <http://ourplaceofnewtrier.eventbrite.com>



Barry Fleischer

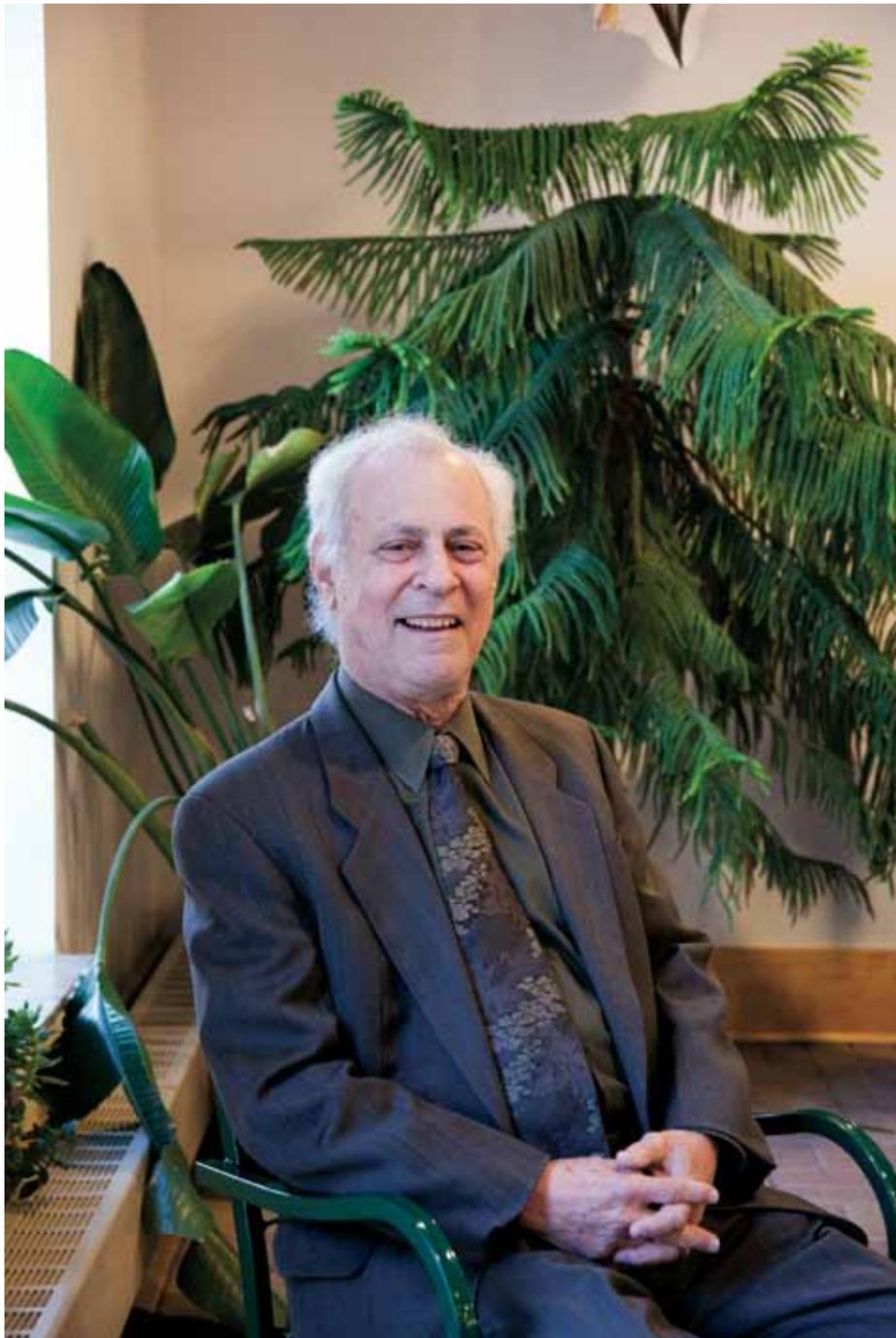
GLENCOE

Township Recognition Award

IT'S DIFFICULT TO PIN DOWN A SPECIFIC JOB DESCRIPTION for all the work that Barry Fleischer does as Chairman of the Committee on Disabilities. Over the years, he's contributed to writing a report highlighting how local congregations successfully made their houses of worship more accessible. He's worked on lobbying the local village and RTA to retain and improve elevators at the Metra station in Winnetka. He's organized a seminar on how to improve coordination with first-responders during moments of crisis and created a "Home Sweet Home" conference, where experts spoke on home modification solutions regarding seniors and persons with disabilities. But if you had to distill Fleischer's work to its core, it would probably come down to this: Fleischer has (and continues to) help us reconsider our understanding of the term "disability" and how relevant such issues are in our community and daily lives.

When he joined the committee 10 years ago, it was a fusion of his professional work (he was working on strategic planning for the Rehabilitation Institute of Chicago and continues there today) and a desire to help his local community (people have a greater sense of purpose and belonging when they give their time, he says). But now it's become a full-fledged avocation, a passion to raise awareness about the real problems that people with disabilities face every day.

In the future, his goal is to fuel further discussion, which he plans to do by initiating a new project through the Township Committee that uses popular movies to highlight disability issues that are important but often invisible to most eyes. "Through my professional work and time on the committee," says Fleischer, "I've learned that we all have varying abilities and while we work to improve the lives of people with 'disabilities,' everyone benefits. Whether we are working to improve access, to provide the fundamental services that improve lives or help people participate meaningfully in life, it's beneficial to all of us. If our committee can raise awareness — even if it's only a little, one person at a time — I believe the work is worthwhile."



Jerry Ginsburg

GLENVIEW

Township Recognition Award

DON'T MAKE ME OUT TO BE A HERO OR ANYTHING like that. ••• Those are some of the words out of Jerry Ginsburg's mouth as he talks about the 15 odd years he's volunteered on various committees in the township. Sometimes his work involves chairing committees that interview candidates for key New Trier Township positions, sometimes it involves overseeing school board issues, but mostly he's dedicated his free time to the Youth Committee (now the Agency Oversight Committee).

Ginsburg doesn't choose who will be receiving funds — that's done by elected officials — but he and his fellow committee members do decide exactly how much money goes to worthy agencies. And thus, he's called upon to ask the tough questions to organization officials when they seek aid. How does your organization serve New Trier Township? What are your long-term policy goals? How do you plan to use the funds? How will your organization benefit our community?

"We never lose an agency," he says. "We always seem to add them, as new issues arise and times change. The key thing we look for is how well they serve the township and how many people they serve."

And thus, Jerry Ginsburg has heard some harrowing stories over the years. Some issues never seem to go away, things like the threat of alcohol and drug abuse or the stress that falls on young students in the area. And some, like stories of battered women told by the YWCA of Evanston, have left an "indelible impression" on him that he finds difficult to shake. But some issues are simply new problems that need addressing.

"I think the biggest issue we face today involves helping elderly people stay in their homes," says Ginsburg, "and have people occasionally help them with basic necessities."

Those services included Meals on Wheels programs that offer seniors two hot meals a day, a dial-a-cab ride that allow seniors to go to the doctor or store for a nominal fee, and a new point of pride, a collaboration with the Jewish Council for the Elderly to use vans specially equipped for the disabled.

"It gives me real joy to do this," says Ginsburg. "I'm just one person of many trying to do good work. We're put on this earth to try and help those who need it, and that's it in a nutshell."

VOLUNTEERISM, IT TURNS OUT, ISN'T ALWAYS BORNE FROM intrinsic virtue. As Lisa Axelrod and Mary Roth will tell you, it's also a learned skill, a trait that can be developed in our children by introducing volunteer opportunities at a young age.

It was with this theory in mind that Axelrod and Roth established the not-for-profit organization, The Kindness Connection (TKC), in 2006. Back then, they were simply a pair of working moms interested in helping their children experience the value of volunteerism.

The problem, they soon realized, was that most volunteer opportunities, like working in soup kitchens or visiting homeless shelters, were limited by age and were unavailable to children in kindergarten or grade school. And yet they knew that research shows that children who are given the opportunity to volunteer at young ages often go on to be greater contributors of time, energy and resources when they became older.

So they joined forces — Mary's service learning experience as a high school teacher linking nicely with Lisa's business acumen — to create meaningful service learning opportunities accessible to youth across the Chicago metropolitan area via their organization, TKC. They began with a pilot program at McKenzie School in Wilmette, reflected on their experiences and created a standardized program that could be used as a template far and wide. Essentially, they created a program that carved out school time on special Kindness Connection Days that allowed youngsters to work on a range of age-appropriate projects.

Sometimes, it was as simple as a hand-decorated placemat made for a homebound couple on a fixed income. Or a chew toy braided together from fleece for lonely dogs and cats in a local animal shelter. Or a brightly-colored book bag tailored to elicit a smile from a child cooped up for one week too many in the hospital.



Mary Roth

WILMETTE

George E. Noyes Community Spirit Award



Lisa Axelrod

WILMETTE

George E. Noyes Community Spirit Award

What mattered, they say, is that the students were taking time out of their day to create something for someone else in need. And at the end of each program, the students would come together to not only discuss ways they could continue to help their community, but also how they felt about doing something for someone else. The result? Pure enthusiasm.

“I have a new favorite memory each time I volunteer at a school because I read the notes the children write to the recipients of their gifts,” says Roth. “The notes are so sincere and show such a deep understanding of who is being helped by the gift, that I can’t help but leave the school with a new memory which I know will last for years to come.”

After the pilot program, Axelrod and Roth formed a board of local women equally committed to expanding volunteer opportunities, each member building relationships with different area schools, which expanded project offerings and formats. Then schools were provided a curriculum that supported Illinois State learning standards and the principles of service learning. And from there, the expansion continued. Over the past two years, TKC has gone through a strategic planning process with a not-for-profit consultant, and hired a part-time operations assistant as well as an executive director, Eva Lu-Bonn.

“I have always felt that being part of a community brings a richness and balance to my life, and that being a part of the community means contributing time, energy and resources. When we spend time together, working toward common goals, our connection to the community is stronger,” says Axelrod. “We believe that The Kindness Connection gives students that opportunity and will make a difference in not only their lives, but for those whom they help and the communities they live in. It’s a terrific feeling and a great motivator.”



Phil Hoza

WINNETKA

Friend of the Township Award

HOW EXACTLY, ONE WONDERS, DO YOU BECOME A FRIEND to an entire township? Do you work for the township? Volunteer? Are you pillar of the community? Do you bring work to the community? Do you help people in times of need?

Try all of the above.

That's Phil Hoza's story. His family has been living in the township since 1915. By the 1930s, both sides of his family were here, one grandfather working as a tailor, the other as the township's always-dependable plumber.

It was only after serving in the army during Vietnam, that Phil Hoza decided he'd drift toward the plumbing side of the family, carrying on a local business, headquartered in downtown Winnetka, just as his father and his father before him did. So yes, he and his forebears have probably saved more woodwork and diverted more water issues in homes across the township than anyone you can name, but since 1977, he's also been a dependable presence in New Trier Township government and civic activities.

If you'd like, he can show you the ballet that elected him clerk to the old Board of Auditors in 1977. In fact, he served a total of 16 years, both as a clerk then a trustee, in township government. "After 16 years," he says, "you tend to burn out and let some new smarter folks come in."

But friends tend to stick around and be there whenever you need them, which is certainly the case with Phil Hoza. For whenever there's a problem spotted with the township hall, he's one of the first ones called in to survey the problem. Over the years, there have been sewer back-ups, roof issues and all sorts of other minor problems. And who was there with his tools? Phil Hoza.

Hoza figures that it was his latest work — helping locate the potential source of a leak in the upper-floor offices, followed by advice on choosing a contractor and a final inspection — that earned him the award, but who's to say, when there's so much volunteer work to choose from? His 16 years as an elected official for the township. His work with the Historical Society. And, of course, the time he's spent keeping the local VFW alive and well.

"It's always been a delight to work with the township and members of the committee," says Hoza. "The truth is, they were always smarter than I was. If you had to pay them their worth, you couldn't pay them enough."

The same, it could be said, for a certain plumber we know.



Brian Bredemann

WILMETTE

Peer Jury Scholarship Award

IN THE BEGINNING, IT SEEMED LIKE AN INTERESTING WAY to learn more about the law. But from the first day Brian Bredemann volunteered to serve in New Trier's Peer Jury program — a novel initiative in which first-time offenders agree to allow their peers, working with Youth Advocates, to assign punishment for their crimes — he instantly realized the experience offered something far more powerful. It wasn't simply an exercise in jury duty; it was a compassionate yet serious program to help teenagers get back on the right side of the law.

The peer jury system, says Bredemann, gives “offenders a second chance to reflect on their mistakes and learn the consequences of their actions before it becomes part of their permanent record.”

For the last two years, Bredemann has been witness to dozens of trials involving his peers and, with the help of his fellow jurists, extended community service hours equal to the offence. He's listened to police testimony. He has heard offenders' side of stories. And he's listened to input from parents.

“No Peer Juror likes to give sentences to another teenager,” says Bredemann. “The way this program has been run, however, shows that the jury becomes an ally of offenders because we can relate to the things that go through their minds.”

Which might explain why Bredemann plans on serving on the jury not just through his senior year at Loyola Academy, but throughout the summer. “The key to volunteering for anybody of any age,” he says, “is to commit to something you truly care about. The time spent volunteering and trying to help others is worth it when you get so much out of it, yourself” 