

THE PARK MONROE

APRIL 2021 NEWSLETTER

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A walker's eye-level view of Chicago's massive Merchandise Mart.

(Photo by Stephen Rankin)

Residents Lent Charity a Heaping Helping Hand

Twice a year until COVID paused her habit, Park Monroe resident and board member Barb Kimble would open her front door to find piles of clothes, small appliances and small items of furniture left by friends and neighbors who knew of her seasonal support for a local non-profit group called Jim's Bridge.

The charity, which is involved in good works and in volunteering at the South Side and West Side neighborhood level, was founded by Barb's former Blue Cross Blue Shield co-worker John Mikulski and his wife Maureen, who grew up on the South Side and now live in Palos Heights.

Jim's Bridge is their non-profit foundation, created in memory of their son, Jim, who took his own life as a young husband and father.

Barb recalls that she had just started at Blue Cross Blue Shield in the learning and development department and didn't know anybody, when she met John, who was in IT. Blue Cross participated in the Chase Corporate Challenge every year, and John invited her to race in it. "Eventually I learned that one of the things he was doing for his charity was to provide volunteers to work the races like the Chase Challenge and the Chicago Marathon," said Barb, who has since retired. "We offered services like distributing water, checking bikes and backpacks, and managing the running corrals. The event sponsors contributed money to Jim's Bridge for the services of the volunteers."

"Beginning about 2010, I worked pretty much every race John did, until COVID put a stop to it. I was the answer girl at Monroe and Michigan for the Chicago Marathon several times!"

About four years ago, Barb began enlisting her Park Monroe neighbors in her effort to collect small usable items in what she described as a "win-win-win. People could get rid of their stuff, knowing it would go to good use," she says.

"Jim's Bridge would collect the goods and sell them by the pound to other charities that served people who needed the things, both domestically and overseas. Then Jim's Bridge would take money it received and pour it into Chicago area foundation work. We did eight campaigns before COVID struck. People ask me if we'll do it again. I'm not sure about June, but maybe in January."



Barb Kimble, second from right, with Maureen and John Mikulski and their son-in-law Christopher Diaz after another Jim's Bridge event.



John and Maureen Mikulski celebrate a good day for learning with young beneficiaries of their charity at St. Gall School.

Jim's Bridge focuses on projects that help K-8 school children and local service organizations in the Little Village and Humboldt Park areas on Chicago's West Side and the Englewood area on Chicago's South Side. The Mikulski's daughter, Kathleen, helped to spearhead the effort from the outset. You can learn more about the foundation at:

<https://www.facebook.com/JimsBridge/>

<http://www.jfmmemorial.org/Newsletter-CURRENT.pdf>

John says his family feels they are helping to provide support for others who suffer the loss of a loved one to suicide and who may be reaching out, trying to understand. "People talk to us about it, not understanding how you can raise a child to be the person he or she was, and yet have this happen," he said. "You're always second guessing about where you went wrong, or what didn't you know? When people volunteer or make a donation, maybe they're saying they want to help keep that memory alive."

Barb described how support would surge at the Park Monroe each time her drives ramped up twice a year, her office and dining room piling up with everything from small appliances, books and lamps to suitcases, shoes, dishes, clothes and clocks. "One time John filled three truckloads," she recalled. "It was 75 percent of what he accumulated!"

– Nancy Malitz