

NEWS

National nonprofit makes a local impact

Assistance League Chicagoland West empowered to identify, address community's needs

By Pamela Lannom

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For more than two decades, members of Assistance League Chicagoland West have been asking themselves the same two questions:

What needs do we see in the community?

How can we help meet them?

"I like the idea that basically I'm in an organization that empowers volunteers to make a difference in the community," said Meg Cooper, vice president of communications. "We're empowered to think about the issues in the community that we see that we can help raise funds to (address) and actually go out and work with people and make a difference."

Chicagoland West is one of 120 chapters nationwide for Assistance League, a Los Angeles-based nonprofit that grew out of efforts to help those in need, such as victims of the 1906 earthquake in San

Francisco. While the national organization has certain rules and requirements, it affords chapters a great deal of autonomy, allowing them to choose causes that are local and meaningful.

For chapter co-founder Linda Gonnella of Oak Brook, delivering winter coats to at-risk children has been the most rewarding initiative.

"Operation School Bell touches me greatly," she said. "It is so special."

She recalled one boy she met while delivering coats to a school on an unseasonably warm autumn day.

"It was 80 degrees out," she recalled. "He asked me to cut off the tag so he could go outside and wear his coat. He walked dancing out the door."

Co-founder Jan McGivern finds the greatest satisfaction in equipping kitchens for women who are starting over.

"The kitchen is the center of a home — it's the heart of

a home — and if somebody can rehabilitate themselves from drugs, if they can bring their family from a battered home into an apartment that has a kitchen, that has dishes and a pan and broom, they can start (anew)," she said. "They can make a meal. They can form their family around the table."

ALCW also distributes pre-literacy training materials to students through local Head Start programs, an outreach that benefitted almost 850 preschoolers and kindergartners in 2015.

Additionally, the group offers scholarships to College of DuPage students.

The four programs are funded through the chapter's annual fundraiser, Books and Brunch, set for Nov. 14 this year at the Abbington in Glen Ellyn.

Books and Brunch was the chapter's inaugural fundraiser, McGivern said. Organizers were worried that first year about attracting

the 150 guests required by Butterfield Country Club to reserve the space.

"We brought in our husbands, families, friends," McGivern said. "We had 154 people at the first Books and Brunch."

Now attendance numbers around 450, Cooper said, and the chapter's balance sheet reflects that growth.

"When I joined we earned probably \$40,000 total in a year and now we're a \$250,000 organization," Cooper noted.

The group's membership has grown over the years as well.

"We absolutely struggled in the beginning to get women. Everybody was so busy," Gonnella said.

Members have been conscientious about attracting new members, in part through informational coffees.

The next gathering will take place at 10 a.m. Tuesday, Oct. 24, at the group's office, 120 E. Ogden Ave., Suite 100, Hinsdale. Potential members are invited to call the office at (630) 321-2529 or send an email to info@alcw.org.

Hinsdale native Diane Mrozek first found Assistance League through a book club she joined after moving back to Hinsdale when her daughter was in seventh grade. Cooper was president and was looking for someone to help with the New Start kitchen program.

"I said, 'I'll help' and the next thing I know I was in charge of Operation New Start," Mrozek said.

Women enjoy the ability to roll up their sleeves and make things happen, Cooper said.

"It's all women who want to do something, not just write a check," Mrozek agreed. "For the most part they like getting their hands dirty."

Members also enjoy the honest assessment offered each year about Assistance League's programs.

"We evaluate all of our programs. We talk about them — what's good, what's bad, what could we change? I don't think many organizations do it the way we do it," Mrozek said. "We do it every

■ MAKING A DIFFERENCE

Making a Difference is a partnership between The Hinsdalean and Assistance League Chicagoland West, whose mission is to deliver education and outreach programs that address needs and help transform lives in local communities.

year. We ask those questions even if it's hard to hear sometimes.

"Everybody's got a say," she added. "If you come and you have an opinion, raise your hand. We want to hear it."

It takes a special group of women to function in that environment, President Linda Legner said.

"It is an amazing group of people," she said. "Every one of them could run the organization, and yet for all those Type A's, there is no squabbling."

Like many other members, Legner has served in a variety of offices and as a board member. Her top priority as the chapter's leader is to support other members.

Or, as she put it, "to keep all the plates spinning — and we have a full set of china," she said.

She encouraged anyone who is interested to get involved.

"There's a lot of work to do and people are welcome to come do as much of it as they can manage and are interested in," Legner said. "I think that's what makes the organization unique, too. There are not hours that you have to do. You find people doing more all the time. The work is interesting. The people are interesting."

The national organization has a new tagline this year: "Transforming lives, strengthening communities."

While the verbiage may be new, the message certainly is not, Cooper noted.

"Forever it's been if you can help people on the fringe be connected, functioning members of our community, we've made the whole community stronger," she said. "That's really the bottom line."



Jan McGivern (left) and Linda Gonnella, two of the founding members of Assistance League Chicagoland West, are still involved in the chapter, which was officially chartered in 1995. They enjoy the work and interacting with fellow members. "I think both Linda and I are so grateful for the wealth of talent and knowledge and experience all these women bring us," McGivern said. (Jim Slonoff photo)