



A PLACE TO BELONG

Parks Foundation of Oak Park

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For more information:

Edward Kerros, ekerros@parksfoundationop.org

Civic leaders volunteer to co-chair Parks Foundation of Oak Park capital campaign to build Community Recreation Center

Two Oak Park community leaders, Mary Jo Schuler and David A. Ansell, M.D., are volunteering to lead a campaign to raise \$25 million in private funds in order to build a Community Recreation Center in Oak Park. The center will help address community wellness needs for multi-generations of Oak Park residents.

A life-time resident of Oak Park, Schuler is a philanthropic leader, businesswoman and parent committed to making a difference in the community. Dr. Ansell is senior vice president for Community Health Equity at Rush University Medical Center in Chicago. His research and advocacy focus on eliminating health inequities; and his most recent book is “The Death Gap: How Inequality Kills.”

The co-chairs said they believe the Community Recreation Center is important for Oak Park, particularly youth who lack for a welcoming, affordable place to participate in after-school programs, and for seniors who express a desire for a year-round, indoor walking track and recreation space.

“A Place to Belong,” the campaign for an Oak Park Community Recreation Center, is being spearheaded by the Parks Foundation of Oak Park. The foundation is a nonprofit, 501-c3, organization committed to supporting Park District of Oak Park facilities and programs that benefit the community.

“A community center -- open, welcoming and available to all the members of the Oak Park community from young to old -- will be a magnet for those who live in Oak Park and for those who are looking to settle here,” said Dr. Ansell. “Not only does it address a gaping community need, it will be a community asset for the next generation. This center has a community feel, and that feeling is what keeps us here.”

Both Mary Jo Schuler and her husband, Stephen Schuler, grew up in south Oak Park, and Park District programs and parks played a significant role in their youth and for their families. “I am most excited about the free after school programming for middle school and high school students because this will bring a daily, active lifestyle routine into their lives,” she said, pointing out that that the Center will be located within 1.1-mile of both middle schools, the high school and high-density housing. “To me, this spells easy access. We want every child, family and senior citizen in Oak Park to feel valued, to feel important, and to have access to a healthy, active lifestyle.”

On Thursday, Feb. 6, more than 75 people responded to the Parks Foundation’s invitation to attend an information reception where they heard more about the center and its benefits to the community.

At the reception, Schuler said: “Let’s never forget, that as adults, as parents, as taxing bodies, as teachers, as donors, leaders, clergy, we collectively have 18 short years to prepare children for adult opportunities and personally, in collaboration with an army of others, I take this responsibility very seriously. Bottom line, I want all families, including under-resourced families, like the one I grew up in, to have access to a lifestyle of fitness, recreation and fun. That is what Oak Park gave me and my husband during our childhoods, and this describes the mission of my family’s philanthropy; to perpetuate access.”

The Parks Foundation plans to offer several community meetings in the coming weeks to share details about the campaign and center with interested community members and prospective supporters.

The Community Recreation Center will provide space for indoor sports, including basketball, pickleball, volleyball; a walking track; a fitness center; and after-school programs and access for middle school and high school students. Phase Two would include an Aquatics Center with indoor swimming pools for lap swim, zero-depth play, and warm water therapy.

Community surveys have validated that Oak Park lacks affordable recreational and fitness opportunities for all families. As facts about the Community Recreation Center become more known, the Foundation is receiving positive responses to requests for funding commitments - from private and corporate donors, to foundation and state grants - all to aid in creating a center for all, built by the community, without raising tax dollars.

The Parks Foundation promotes giving opportunities around Oak Park parks and to support extraordinary projects within the Park District of Oak Park. Its mission is to collaborate with Oak Park residents, community groups and partner organizations to support exceptional and extraordinary projects that enhance our parks and community life. Founded in 2012, the Foundation is chartered with the State of Illinois as a 501(c)3 charitable organization. While a separate and independent entity, the Foundation coordinates closely with the Park District of Oak Park to help address community health, recreation and wellness needs for all. For more information, visit the Parks Foundation website at: <https://parksfoundationop.org>.