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Lombard man aims to make most of his days



Dennis McNicholas was named Lombard Senior Man of the Year this fall for his many contributions to the community. Service to people makes life more fulfilling, he says.

Bev Horne | Staff Photographer

Susan Dibble

Dennis McNicholas likes to joke that his "no" muscle doesn't seem to work.

So when the 41-year Lombard resident and attorney is asked to volunteer, he's likely to say yes.

No doubt the community is all the better for it.

McNicholas, who was named Lombard's Senior Man of the Year this fall, is an ambassador, past board member and past president of the Lombard Area Chamber of Commerce and Industry; has served more than 20 years on the village's Economic and Community Development Committee, which he heads; leads the International Service Committee of the

Rotary Club of Lombard; and has spearheaded the collection of used bicycles and medical equipment at Lombard's fall Recycling Extravaganza.

If that's not enough, he serves on the board of governors to raise funds for Elmhurst Hospital; is active in his church; and, with his wife, Karin, serves as co-chairman of the marriage enrichment ministry for 16 parishes in the eastern portion of the Diocese of Joliet.

"He's passionate about Lombard," says Yvonne Invergo, executive director of the Lombard Chamber, who nominated McNicholas for Senior Man of the Year.

McNicholas admits he's a gregarious guy.

"I enjoy being with people. It makes life more fulfilling," he says.

But McNicholas is more than a busy man who likes people.

"He's an inspirational guy," Invergo says. "You put an obstacle in front of Dennis -- rather than avoid it, he'll figure out a way to conquer it."

This is a 70-year-old who learned to swim in his mid-50s so he could compete in triathlons with family members. He took voice lessons at 63 so he could be a volunteer cantor in his church. This fall, he self-published a memoir about a friend he met in the Army, a book he worked on for 11 years titled "God Called Collect from Cleveland."

McNicholas says he wasn't always so bold. In an article he recently wrote for Guideposts magazine, he says he grew up with a cautious father and never considered himself a risk taker.

But when one of his daughters suggested they do a triathlon together, he said yes and headed to the pool to practice, despite having a long-held fear of water after nearly drowning as a kid. Fourteen years later, he's still doing triathlons and doesn't want to give it up.

"It keeps me healthy," he says. "It helps me deal with stress."

When his first grandson's life was at risk because a virus destroyed his liver, McNicholas spent a lot of time praying for Jack. Jack's struggle for life also made him realize that he wanted to make the most of whatever time he had left, so he became a cantor to sing for Jack -- despite a lifelong fear of singing in public and memorizing the wrong psalm for his debut.

"I really enjoy it now," he says.

McNicholas, the father of a son and two daughters, says his daughters' volunteer work with Jesuit social services after college inspired his interest in international service projects.

He's led the Rotary in supporting water projects for Haiti and shelter boxes worldwide for people who suffer disasters. McNicholas also led the Rotary in supporting the collection and shipment of used bicycles to orphaned children in the south African Kingdom of Lesotho, an effort that Dave Gorman, Lombard's assistant director of public works, started four years ago.

"He's been supportive all along," Gorman says. "Dennis has been a wonderful Lombardian."

In the midst of his activities, McNicholas finds plenty of time to baby-sit his five grandchildren, including Jack, now 8. He says he's been fortunate and is grateful for a supportive wife.

"I've been very lucky. I didn't do anything to deserve to be born in this particular place in the world at this time," he says.

And, at age 70, he sees no reason to pull back.

"I want to be thoroughly used up when I die," he says, borrowing a quote from playwright George Bernard Shaw. "I don't see that there's a finish line when it comes to helping people."

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