



Kevin and his father Dan O'Donnell.



Leah and Richard Steel with Dan O'Donnell.

Photo courtesy of Dimitre



Dan O'Donnell in his hardware store.

Photo courtesy of New City

Lincoln Park's best neighbor, Dan O'Donnell, dead at 80

BY PATRICK BUTLER

He was the best neighbor anyone could have.

Not every neighborhood has a Dan O'Donnell, but every neighborhood needs a Dan O'Donnell.

Whether it was loaning you that special tool you needed to fix the furnace, finding you - and vouching for - a laborer, looking after a lonely senior citizen, or buying a sandwich and coffee for a stranger, kindness defined the man.

He was the guy who drove your mom to the doctor in a pinch, slipped some nun a handful of cash on the sly, showed up with a bag full of groceries when the paychecks ended, or a handful of kids Christmas gifts for families with less, as he did just this last Christmas.

He was the guy who would make arrangements to help get a young man back home to his own family in Ireland after an accidental death on Chicago's lakefront, as he did in 2009. That was Dan O'Donnell.

O'Donnell died Jan. 19 in Florida after suffering a severe brain hemorrhage. He had just taken a powerboat ride with his son on the Gulf Coast, and died back on shore with the salt spray still on his face and sea water in his veins. He loved being on the water more than anywhere else.

Dan had many boats in his life, and frequently took those who didn't have the resources to own a boat out for joy rides.

"There are tears - lots of them - on both sides of the Atlantic as word gets out around town," said North Sider Kathy Hills last week on learning of his death.

At one time or another, the Lincoln Park hardware store owner, church-goer, world traveler, community activist and member of dozens of community organizations helped just about anyone who crossed his path in need of help, said Leah Steele, retired head of the Sulzer Library, and board member of the Ravenswood Lakeview Historical Assoc., and volunteer at the Irish American Heritage Center.

"My memories of Dan always include him helping others," Steele said. "I remember when a young girl developed a flesh eating-disease and the next thing I knew he had filled up the Sulzer Library with the press and others who wanted to help," she said. "Boy did she get help, and quick!"

Or when he helped a young

Keith O'Reilly whose carefree summer in Chicago ended in tragedy when he decided to dive in for a swim while watching the sunrise over Lake Michigan after a night out. He died after severely injuring his head and spine diving off the North Ave. pier.

"He negotiated the medical cost down [for O'Reilly and the young girl] to practically nothing and provided other support for the families," Steele said. That young girl has grown up to be a healthy young adult today.

When the Katrina hurricane struck, O'Donnell rallied his neighbors and friends to send semi-truck loads of food, supplies and clothing to the stricken. That done, he turned to other needs, raising up to \$15,000 for local food pantries, Steele said.

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"If Dan found someone who needed help, he provided what he could - or found someone who could do it better," Steele said.

In an earlier day he and his friend Rev. George Rice also found time to get the city to create the Archbishop Sheil Community Park on Southport, and later get run-in by the police for holding fundraising Bingo games for St. Andrew's Church. (Don't worry, a nun snuck all the cash out a backdoor during the raid.)

Then, years later, after Rev. Rice died, O'Donnell pulled a work crew together and rehabbed his dear friend's home for his wife Marilyn.

Dan was a founding member of the Friends of Lake View High School, and helped to raise tens of thousands of dollars for the school. He personally helped to rehab the large stained glass window above the building's south side entrance.

He was a founding member of the Friends of The Sulzer Regional Library, and he and a few others raised funds for many concerts, author readings, children's readings and services to the hard-of-hearing. The Friend's group paid for the grand piano that is still in use at Sulzer.

In 1967 O'Donnell took a part-



Ald. Michele Smith [43rd], Dan O'Donnell, Mayor Lori Lightfoot and Ald. Tom Tunney [44th]. Photo courtesy of City of Chicago Mayor's Office

interest in Armitage Hardware, 925 W. Armitage Ave., eventually buying out his partner. Founded as a general store in 1896, it became a hardware store in 1922. In its hey day before the advent of Home Depot and Menards, it was what a real hardware store was supposed to be. Prices were fair and 'fix-it' advice safe, solid and abundant.

The O'Donnell family have pretty much gotten out of the hardware business now, but they still have a small retail storefront and do a healthy online business selling Weber Grills and smokers, as well as other dry goods.

Back in the 1960's, when Dan and his wife invested in the community, Lincoln Park was the furthest thing from its current incarnation of million-dollar homes and pricey stores and restaurants. "You could buy anything on the block for \$4,000," O'Donnell recalled in a 2003 Chicago Tribune story. "It was just a gang-torn neighborhood." The O'Donnell clan helped renew and rebuild Lincoln Park, and later in life he and his wife actually moved into a suite on the top floor of their landmark building.

A 50-year member of the Kiwanis Club of Lakeview, every year he helped to raise money on Peanut Day that was dispersed to dozens of North Side charities.

He did dozens of favors for schools, churches, and charitable organizations in his community, mostly behind the scenes, never expecting praise or honors. It's just what good neighbors do.

Some of his favorite projects were caring for his historic Lincoln Park-area properties, always working on them with an eye toward architectural preservation.

But in recent years, he was probably best known for his work with Irish J-1 students visiting Chicago during the summers. What started as an effort to find summer housing and jobs for two girls and six boys found sitting on their luggage in front of a drug store on Armitage Ave. in the 1990s turned into helping thou-

sands of kids manage a summer in Chicago, since many showed up in town with little money, no job lined up, nor a place to stay. At times the emergency housing was in his hardware store's own basement, or a church basement up the street.

"I just want the kids to leave with a good taste of America. I don't want them to go home with bad memories," he told the Chicago Tribune in 2009.

The program had grown to the point where by 2013, nearly 1,500 Irish students, ages 19 to 21, were turning up at Armitage Hardware every year seeking help. And help he did, finding them apartments and work, getting CTA passes and phones, arranging for use of the internet facilities at DePaul Univ., directing them to the Social Security office, providing maps, purchasing household items on the cheap at Target, and suggesting where to go for fun (and where to avoid danger) in Chicago... anything they may need to get set up for the summer.

On March 13, 2013, O'Donnell was honored by the Irish Immigrant Support Group and 300 well-wishers at Gaelic Park on the South Side, and in Feb. 2020 he was awarded by the The Ireland Network of Chicago for his work with Irish students.

Some of his nearby neighbors may not have met him, but in Ireland he was a legend. If not for the pandemic travel ban, Aer Lingus may have had to add extra flights to Chicago to get the mourners to his funeral.

As early as five years ago, friends were suggesting the Irish J-1 program would only grow larger and that he needed more help. The program still needs a helping hand. O'Donnell won't be there to help out this summer, but his son Brian will be taking over that duty. Volunteers are welcome, any takers?

He is survived by his wife Kathleen, daughter Erin, sons Kevin and Brian, their spouses and bunches of grandkids and neighbors whose lives were all enhanced by their proximity to the best neighbor in the 'hood. They will all miss him dearly. Services were held Jan. 27.

Contributions may be made to the Kiwanis Club of Lakeview, and sent care of Armitage Hardware Direct, 925 W. Armitage, Chicago, IL 60614. All donations will be given to the local charities and organizations that O'Donnell held dear.

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