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—Mike Carmody, Executive Director of Opportunity Knocks non-profit



**“THIS IS GREAT”
THIS IS MY TIME**

One of the Sibshops facilitators is Mike Carmody, executive director of Opportunity Knocks, a non-profit that serves people with intellectual/developmental disabilities. “It’s a beautiful thing when the kids are all together,” said Carmody. “The kids are resilient—it’s amazing to watch young people, especially during this crisis. They go with it. They’re willing and active participants and have been more open to sharing some of the things going on in their lives. It’s a feeling of “This is great. I have an hour to myself. This is my time.”

Story contributed by Matt Baron. Pictured top left: Mike Carmody at Halloween last year (courtesy of Laurie Johnson); and Kent and Malinda Meyer at their home in River Forest.

Amid COVID-19, Sibshops shifts to Zoom-based support SERVING 1ST-7TH GRADE SIBLINGS OF KIDS WITH SPECIAL NEEDS

Pivoting with these pandemic times, Sibshops has gone virtual. After a pair of pilot Zoom-based sessions this summer netted promising results, Sibshops’ fall programming launched, via Zoom, last month and will run through December. Since 2015, this program for 1st through 7th graders in Oak Park and River Forest has served more than 50 brothers and sisters of those with disabilities, physical illness, or emotional/mental health challenges.

At the heart of Sibshops: siblings learn from and support one another while gaining a deeper perspective on their significance and value in the family dynamic. River Forest Township, in partnership with Thrive Counseling Center, funds and sponsors Sibshops. Spots are still available for more boys and girls to participate, said Laurie Johnson, a therapist at Thrive who is a Sibshops facilitator.

The mother of a 9-year-old participant, who has been part of Sibshops for three years, said the summer pilot sessions were an invaluable outlet. Having all six family members in such close quarters as a consequence of the pandemic has been “kicking our butt,” she acknowledged, and

“we appreciate that, within this new reality, Sibshops is being offered.” Although some aspects of in-person sessions cannot be replicated, there has been “a cozy vibe more than I expected,” Johnson noted. “The kids get to see each other in their homes or wherever they are.”

Sibshops fulfills a key element of the Township’s mission in providing human services, particularly in supporting mental wellness and those with disabilities, said River Forest Township Supervisor Carla Sloan. “As a parent of a special needs child, I learned how important it is to stay focused on my other children as well, and to give them their unique time,” Sloan said. “They need that time to express the joys and challenges of having a special needs sibling. Sibshops helps kids do just that.”

Upcoming Sibshops dates are October 3 and 17, November 7 and 21, December 8 and 19, 11:30 am to 1 pm. Fee for each session has been reduced to \$5 and need-based scholarships are also available. Space is limited. To register, contact Laurie Johnson at 708-383-7500, ext. 409, or ljohnson@thrivecc.org. A link will be provided upon registration.