



OAK PARK TOWNSHIP CENTENNIAL

1903  2003

100



YEARS *of* SERVING PEOPLE

To commemorate our first century of service to the Oak Park community, we're taking a nostalgic look backwards in this special edition of the Oak Park Township News. Join us as we chronicle our first 100 years and celebrate the commitment of our employees, the dedication of our board members and volunteers and the Township residents whose lives have been enhanced by our programs and services.





Oak Park Volunteer Fire Department, 1903



Looking west on Lake Street, 1928



Oak Park's first automobile, 1902



721 North Euclid Avenue

Oak Park Township: Of the People,



A 1901 notice directing local citizens to "come out in force and bring your friends" for a meeting to elect officers for the "new Village of Oak Park."

Oak Parkers have always been independent thinkers. So it's not surprising that the earliest residents of Oak Park opted for an independent government that gave them a greater voice in decisions that affected their lives and their community.

The Quest for Independence

The tale of our Township begins in the waning years of the nineteenth century, when the area now known as Oak Park was still a part of the Township of Cicero.

A sense of community pride and identity was beginning to emerge in the Oak Park area and residents were becoming more invested in forming and controlling their own local government.

In 1898, Oak Park residents held a special election to create the Village of Oak Park, separate from Cicero Township. Although the majority of the residents voted in favor of the resolution, the State Supreme Court later declared the election illegal.



Cicero Town Hall, 1906

After residents of the Austin neighborhood successfully broke away from the Cicero Township in 1899, choosing annexation to the city, Oak Parkers began to petition once again

for their own village.

By 1901, under the revised City and Villages Act, the citizens of Oak Park had formally seceded from Cicero Township to establish their own municipal government. The first village elections were held in 1902 and Oak Park celebrated its new status as a united, self-contained community determined to create its own destiny.



Oak Park Avenue, north of North Boulevard

But the separation of Oak Park from the Cicero Township left the community in a state of legal limbo with regard to township functions such as property assessment and tax collection. Cicero continued to perform these functions for Oak Park until 1903, when 330 voters cast ballots to elect officials for the newly created Oak Park Township. The first slate of officers included a Township Supervisor, a Clerk, a Collector, an Assessor and five Justices of the Peace. In 1961, Township Auditors replaced the Justices of the Peace. In 1974, the Auditors were renamed "Trustees."

The Township Supervisor's duties were not well defined until 1936, when a small group of electors put him in charge of relief for the village's impoverished residents. The state

continued on page 4



Did you know that townships across the country all hold their annual meetings on the second Tuesday in April?

Highlights from the First 100 Years



1901-02
Special elections are held to establish the Village of Oak Park and to elect Village officials.

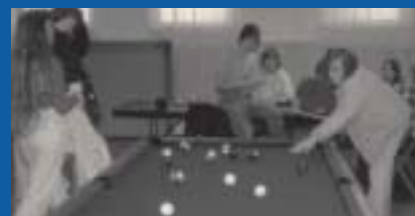
Madison Street Trolley, 1903

1903
The first Township officers are elected.

1936
The Township establishes relief services for impoverished community residents and hires its first social worker.

Youth Canteen, 1977

1967
A program for senior citizens is proposed. Electors vote in favor of a Township Committee on Youth.



1969-70
Mental Health Services and Youth Services are introduced. The first Citizens Advisory Committee is formed.



Senior Bus Dedication, 1977



Laslo E. Tako (right) is sworn in as Township Supervisor, 1985



Town Meeting, 1976





A Day in Our Village, 1998


by the People and for the People

A Case of Mistaken Identity?

The Township? Is that the same as the Village? We've heard that question a lot over the years. Although we've been a part of the Oak Park landscape since 1903, many people are still a little bit fuzzy about the difference between Oak Park Township and the Village of Oak Park. Here's how to distinguish one from the other:

 The Village is in charge of municipal services such as the police department, the fire department, parking and streets. The Township focuses on human or social services that enhance the lives of the children, teens, adults and senior citizens in our community.

 Village Hall is located at Madison and Lombard. Oak Park Township is located at 105 South Oak Park Avenue.

 Village services maintain the community. Township services sustain its residents. Working in concert, these two forms of government make Oak Park a great place to live.

Townships: The Grass-Roots Style of Government

Townships have a long and distinguished history in America. In fact, the township is the oldest form of democratic government still in existence on the North American continent.

The township form of government was introduced by early New England settlers who had fled the autocratic, centralized governments of Europe — only to encounter similar conditions developing in the New World.

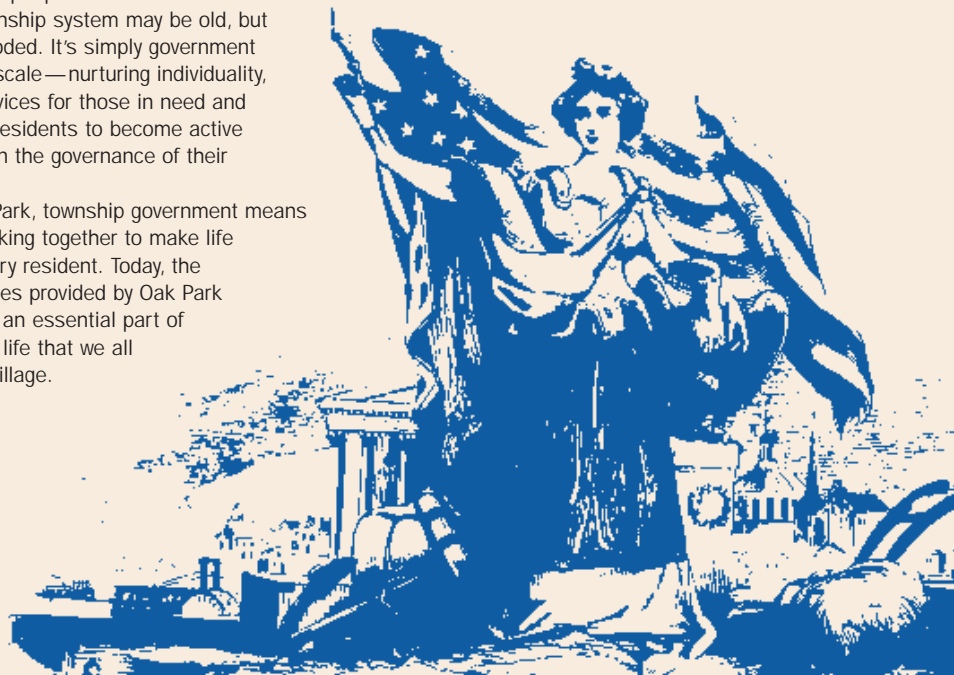
The first township was established in Providence, Rhode Island in 1636 to give these Early American settlers a voice in decisions affecting their communities. Earlier versions of this form of local, direct democracy can be traced all the way back to pre-Christian Athens and Sumer (now southern Iraq).

An important part of township government was the town meeting, where every citizen had the right to weigh in on every public issue.

Because of its small size and local nature, the township is still the form of government that is closest to the people.

The township system may be old, but it's not outmoded. It's simply government on a human scale—nurturing individuality, providing services for those in need and empowering residents to become active participants in the governance of their community.

In Oak Park, township government means everyone working together to make life better for every resident. Today, the human services provided by Oak Park Township are an essential part of the quality of life that we all enjoy in our village.



1971
The Senior Citizens Committee is formed and the Meals-at-Home program is established.



1973
The Advisory Committee on Child Care and the Community Mental Health Board are formed.

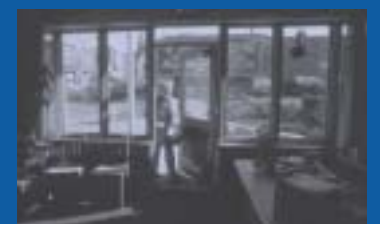
Kroupa's grocery store, 1973, before its transformation into the Township's offices.

1974
The Township moves to its permanent home at 105 South Oak Park Avenue.

1975
A transportation program for senior citizens and disabled individuals is introduced.

1977
The Senior Citizen Information and Referral Service, the Energy Assistance program and the Income Tax Assistance program are introduced.

1978
Chore Service for Seniors is established.



Oak Park Township Offices, 1977

1983
The Township assumes operation of the community's Senior Nutrition Center.

YOUTH SERVICES

Promoting a Safe and Healthy Lifestyle for Township Youth

Adolescence is a profoundly exciting and vulnerable time of life. Young people are dreaming of independence, but many lack the maturity to make the decisions that will put them on a healthy track in life. Peer pressure, family problems, academic stress and negative social influences such as gang activity and drugs can add to the confusion.

Since the late 1960s—a period of changing social mores that brought problems such as substance abuse out of the inner-city and into neighboring suburbs such as Oak Park—the Township has made a significant commitment to programming that promotes the well being of young people in our community.

In 1967, local citizens voted in favor of the development of a Township Committee on Youth composed of citizen volunteers. The Township hired its first Youth Director in 1969. In the ensuing years, the Township's commitment to young people led to the creation of programs that addressed a wide variety of issues ranging from juvenile delinquency to alcohol and drug abuse.

In 1986, the Township's Youth Committee established a drop-in Youth Canteen. Open on weekdays during the lunch hour, the Canteen became a popular place where teens could relax and make friends in a positive, welcoming environment. Other Township services that young Oak Parkers enjoyed in the 1980s included a teen employment service, homework assistance, fishing and camping trips and a referral hotline.

In 1990, the Township formed a Youth Advocacy Council to give young people a voice in local government and events. That same year, the Township made a strategic financial move, shifting from its former role as a direct service provider to contracts with local agencies and organizations. This enabled the Township to use its resources more efficiently to provide enhanced programming for more young people in the community.

Between 1993 and 1995, a number of violent, gang-related incidents in the community—including a drive-by shooting and retaliatory beatings that resulted in the death of a teenager—led Township Youth Committee officials to implement a series of intergovernmental initiatives proposed by the recently established Gang and Drug Task Force of Oak Park and River Forest.

The most notable of these new initiatives was the Township's Youth Intervention program, which provides direct services to young people in Oak Park and River Forest. The park districts, libraries, school districts, townships and village governments in both communities provide funding for the program and have direct access to three youth interventionists on the Township Youth Services staff. These interventionists provide training for school, library, park district, police department and village employees; coordinate youth and family services provided by local social service and government agencies, and work directly with young people and their families to address issues such as gang activity, violence and substance abuse. Honored as a Best Practices program at the National Mayors Conference in 1999, this innovative approach to youth intervention has contributed to a measurable decrease in juvenile arrests in both communities.

By 1999, the Youth Committees of Oak Park and River Forest had joined forces and combined resources to jointly support contracted youth programs in both townships. Today, Youth Services of Oak Park and River Forest Townships supports more than 40 educational, recreational and vocational programs that touch the lives of more than 10,000 young people and their families each year. 🍂



Local teens enrolled in the Police Explorers program, which is partially funded by Oak Park Township and the Village of Oak Park. This youth program was founded to create opportunities for positive interaction between young people and the police department. Explorers accompany the officers on their rounds, engage in police training exercises, learn about local laws and participate in other police and recreational activities.

continued from page 2

authorized the Township to levy an annual tax of thirty cents on each dollar of assessed valuation for Poor Relief, a financial assistance program for low-income residents. Now called General Assistance, Poor Relief was the Township's first foray into the realm of social services.

By the late 1960s, the Township had begun to expand its horizons—moving beyond financial assistance to address other needs in the community. In 1970, the Township established its Youth Services program and introduced a number of mental health programs. Senior Services followed in 1971. The Township also began to provide funding for various mental health agencies through its Community Mental Health Board, which was formed by citizen vote in 1973.

The Era of Expansion

During the 1950s and 1960s, Oak Park Township had been renting office space in various locations around South Boulevard and Oak Park Avenue. By the 1970s, however, as the Township expanded its mission—and its staff—to provide an ever-growing slate of services for a diverse populace, it was becoming increasingly costly and impractical to rent a space large enough to accommodate the Township's operations.

The search for a permanent home for the Township began in earnest. By 1973, the

1986

The Township opens a new Youth Center. Senior Services begins operating the Senior Lunch Program and Activity Center. The expansion and renovation of the Township's offices begins.

1987

The Township's expanded and remodeled offices reopen.



1988

The Community Mental Health Board initiates the Unified Services Plan, the Township's first direct-service program for residents with major diagnosable mental illness.

Newly renovated Township offices, 1987



Homeowner Howard Akines, shown above with his wife, Ruth, loves living in Oak Park. "The Township has made it a better place for us to live," says Akines. "The Township Assessor suggested that I apply for the Senior Citizen Tax Deferral program, which loans you money against the equity in your home to pay property taxes. He even came to my house with the paperwork and brought me back to the office so that we could copy the forms and get them postmarked by the deadline."

During the Township's earliest days, the Township Assessor actually assessed local prop-

erties for the purpose of property taxation. That changed in the 1930s, however, when the Cook County Assessor's office began assessing Oak Park properties. Today, the Township Assessor advocates for community residents, helping homeowners file appeals on their property tax assessments, answering questions about property taxes and serving as an intermediary between villagers and the Cook County

Assessor's Office. "We help people help themselves," says the Township's current Assessor.



Oak Park Township offices, 1974

Township had become the new owner of a building at 105 South Oak Park Avenue that had formerly housed Kroupa's, a neighborhood grocery store. After extensive remodeling to transform the building from its former

function as a purveyor of produce and other foodstuffs into a site suitable for the provision of human services, the Township opened its new offices to the public in 1974.

Ensclosed in its new headquarters, the Township enjoyed an era of unfettered expansion. New programs were created to meet the needs of senior citizens, young people, low-income families and individuals with chronic mental illness or developmental disabilities. In fact, 80 percent of the services offered over the course of the ensuing decade were added after the Township's move to its permanent home.

This expansion came at a price, however. By the mid-1980s, the Township offices could no longer accommodate the administration of all of its programs and services and adequately house its staff.

By this time, the Township and its services had become such an integral part of the quality of life in Oak Park that the only option was to move forward with an expansion of the

Township offices. In 1986, Township officials enlisted the services of a local architecture firm and, in 1987, completed the expansion and renovation project at a cost of \$434,000.

The expansion paved the way for a more efficient Town Hall in the heart of what was now a thriving business district. The additional square footage provided critically needed working space for many Township programs—including the Township's Youth Committee, which had previously been housed on the third floor of the Dole Branch of the Oak Park Library—in one centralized location.

Your Township Today

From its humble beginnings serving Oak Park's population of 3,000 residents in 1903, our Township has evolved into a full-service unit of local government serving Oak Park's 53,000 residents in 2003.

Today, Oak Park Township continues to identify and address unmet needs in our community, providing direct services and supporting programs and services offered by local social service organizations. Meals and transportation services for seniors, supervised residential housing and job placement programs for the

continued on page 6



Did you know that you can register to vote at the Township offices? Prior to elections, the Township Clerk extends his office hours so that community residents can register on evenings or weekends.

1990
A Youth Advocacy Council is established to give young people a voice in Township government and events.



Township mini-bus for seniors and disabled residents

1993
The Township's Youth and Senior Services programs win three state awards.

1994
The Community Mental Health Board becomes the only mental health board in the state to be Medicaid certified for its case-management services.

1996
The Youth Intervention Program is introduced.



1999
The Townships of Oak Park and River Forest initiate a collaborative Youth Services program.

2002
The Townships of Oak Park and River Forest pool their resources and funding to provide enhanced services for senior citizens in both communities.

2003
The Township celebrates its first century of service to the Oak Park community.

Oak Leaves, 1992

Enriching the Lives of Township Seniors

What makes a life rich and satisfying for a senior citizen? For someone who lives alone, living the good life could mean sharing a noonday meal with friends at the Senior Dining Center. For a senior with limited financial resources, it could mean feeling confident that safe, affordable housing will always be available—and that heat and electricity will always bring warmth and light into one’s life. For someone who is homebound, it could be the security of knowing that a hot, nutritious meal will be delivered every day—rain or shine. For a senior with a sense of adventure, it could mean having regular access to transportation to take part in the myriad cultural and recreational opportunities that the world has to offer.

For more than three decades—since Oak Park Township formed its Senior Citizens Committee in 1971—the Township has helped seniors in our community achieve those goals.

In 1974, the committee circulated its first senior survey to determine the needs and desires of local seniors. Before the decade was out, the committee had addressed the needs of those who had responded to the survey by partnering with various agencies and organizations to introduce a Senior Nutrition Center, a transportation program, an Employment Center, a free tax preparation service, a household chore service and more.

The 1980s brought additional services, including a subsidized taxi service, the Senior Lunch and Activity program, home-delivered meals, defensive driving classes and a caregiver’s support group.

In just over a decade, the Township had become so successful at meeting the needs of seniors that a local newspaper journalist made this observation in the May 23, 1984 issue of *Oak Leaves*:

If there’s any place on the face of the earth where people try to make life easier for senior citizens, it’s in Oak Park.

In the mid-nineties, the Township received state and national recognition for partnering with the Senior Citizens Center of Oak Park and River Forest and the Oak Park Arms (a residential facility for independent living) to offer a variety of services for seniors under one roof.

In 1999, the Township piloted an innovative program that subsidized meals at local restaurants to make it possible for seniors on fixed incomes to dine out on a regular basis. And in 2001, the townships of Oak Park and River Forest entered into an intergovernmental agreement to jointly administer enhanced programming for seniors in both communities.

Today, Oak Park is a great place to be a senior—thanks to the Township’s ongoing mission to maximize the independence of seniors while enhancing their quality of life.



Mary Belcastro (left) has benefited from many of the Township’s programs and services for seniors since 1992—from counseling and case management to housing assistance, home-delivered meals, homemaker services and regular rides on the Township’s mini-bus. “The staff at Senior Services is always there for me,” says the 79-year old Oak Park resident.

continued from page 5

severely mentally disabled, after-school activities for youth and gang prevention/intervention initiatives are just a few of the programs and services that your Township is proud to sponsor.

Our assessor’s office helps hundreds of people annually with property tax appeals and other information pertaining to local real estate. Our Clerk maintains all records for the Township, registers citizens to vote and provides applications for absentee and handicapped voting.

Our citizen advisory committees, staff and board members regularly evaluate the Township’s direct services and funded programs to monitor their quality and efficacy.

This compassionate and conscientious approach to serving people has earned the Township local, state and national recognition. In recent years, Oak Park Township has been commended for its support of and dedication to programs that promote healthier, happier lives.

One of the Township’s greatest accomplishments has been its ability to enlist the imagination, energy and vision of community residents to solve local problems. By stimulating citizen participation through volunteer programs and voluntary service on advisory committees and Township boards—Oak Park Township has helped to create a healthy, thriving community with programs and services that meet the needs of its residents and reflect the input of its constituents.

For 100 years, the staff, elected officials and board members of Oak Park Township have listened to and responded to the voices of the voting public—keeping alive the centuries-old flame of direct, responsive and responsible local government.

For Oak Park Seniors, Age has its Privileges

It’s been said that seniors are a “privileged class” in Oak Park—thanks in part to the Township’s partnerships with dozens of local agencies and organizations to provide the following services:

- Dine-Out program
- Professional case management services
- Curb-to-curb, handicapped accessible transportation
- In-home chore services
- Home-delivered meals for homebound residents
- Free income tax preparation
- Senior lunch and activity program at the Senior Dining Center
- Information and Referral Service
- Pharmaceutical Assistance program
- Simple will preparation, health screenings, elder abuse intervention, insurance assistance, financial assistance and more

MENTAL HEALTH SERVICES

A Compassionate Commitment to the Social and Emotional Well Being of Township Residents

Quality of life means something different to every Oak Park Township resident. It could be the newfound confidence, self-esteem and enhanced mental health that a developmentally disabled individual gains from job and life skills training. For a person with AIDS, it could be the emotional sustenance provided by a support group or therapy. For a victim of domestic violence, it could mean the emotional support needed to break away from a destructive relationship.

Quality of life has always been a high priority for Township residents. So it's not surprising that the Township has gone the extra mile to meet the developmental, social and psychological needs of people at every stage of life—from infancy and adolescence through senescence.

Oak Park Township's commitment to mental health services dates back to 1973, when the Community Mental Health Board (CMHB), which was formed by citizen vote, began supporting mental health services. Using local property taxes, the CMHB assesses, funds and evaluates mental health services in three major areas: community mental health, developmental disabilities and substance abuse.

In 1988, the Board introduced a direct-service program called the Unified Services Plan (USP). The USP provides one-on-one case management for residents with major, diagnosable mental illness—linking them with services that will help them succeed as functioning members of society. Since its inception, the USP has received national recognition for its hands-on, community-based approach to case management services that makes it possible for individuals with chronic mental illness to realize their full potential for independence, productivity and integration into the community.

An affiliated program, the Community Integrated Living Arrangement (CILA) was formed later to support housing and training for seriously mentally ill individuals. A volunteer program promotes the active participation of USP clients in the community. 🍂

Bob Gilliam (right), a USP client since 1989, checks in on a furry friend at the Trailside Museum in River Forest. "The USP staff got me a volunteer job at Trailside," says Gilliam. "That led to a paying job taking care of the animals here. I love my job so much that I am now studying to be a naturalist at Triton College. The USP staff also taught me how to manage my money, helped me set and achieve goals and helped me find an apartment so that I could live independently in the community." 🍂



Advocating for a Healthier, Happier Community

To promote the emotional, psychological and social well being of village residents, the Community Mental Health Board supports the following agencies and organizations:

Community Response: meets the housing and basic life needs of people with HIV/AIDS

Community Support: in-home respite services for developmentally disabled individuals

Family Service and Mental Health Center of Oak Park/River Forest: aftercare following psychiatric hospitalization, substance abuse prevention, police crisis/psychiatric emergency services, therapy and crisis stabilization, outpatient counseling

Fillmore Center for Human Services: outpatient therapy for emotionally disturbed youth, psychiatric and vocational rehabilitation for adults with serious mental illness

Grateful House: residential treatment for women with substance abuse problems

Hephzibah Children's Association: child welfare services for children and their families

National Alliance for the Mentally Ill – Metro Suburban: recreational opportunities for mentally ill individuals

Oak/Leyden Developmental Services: services for individuals with developmental disabilities

Oak Park/River Forest High School: substance abuse counseling

Oak Park Township Senior Services: case counseling management

Parenthesis: education and counseling for families with children at risk of abuse

Sarah's Inn: services for victims of domestic violence, their families and their abusers

Suburban Access: case management for developmentally disabled individuals

Seguin Services, Inc.: vocational services and life skills training for developmentally disabled individuals

Unified Services Plan: assertive case management services for residents with chronic mental illness



Volunteers: The Heart and Soul Behind Oak Park Township

Since 1994, Rosemary Irmis (above) has circumnavigated rain puddles, stomped through snow banks and braved icy sleet to deliver meals to homebound Oak Park residents of all ages for the Township's **Meals-at-Home** program.

"I go out every Monday no matter what the weather is," says Irmis. "I've found it to be very rewarding. I've met a lot of wonderful people."

According to Irmis, some of the homebound residents on her route enjoy the human contact as much as the food.

"Some people don't have family and aren't able to get out," she notes. "I may be the only person they see during the day."

After nine years of service, this dedicated volunteer could easily say that she's done her part for the community and take a break. But Irmis, who also serves on the board of the Volunteer Center, has no intention of giving up her route anytime soon.

"I plan to do this for a long time," she says. "I keep coming back because of the people—they're my favorite part of the job."

This is just one example of the volunteer spirit that has powered the Township's programs and animated its boards and committees over the years.

"Volunteerism is the heart and soul of Township government," remarked Laslo Tako in a 1987 newspaper article written during his 12-year tenure as Township Supervisor. "With the thousands of volunteer hours so willingly given by our citizens, the Township is able to significantly extend the services that it offers."

Although many things have changed since then, the role of volunteers remains the same: to help improve the quality of life in Oak Park by helping the Township carry out its mission of people helping people. 🍂



Township Clerk Gregory P. White, 1997



Get Together Club, 1977



Delivering meals, 1970s



Voting booth, 1977



Take a Child Fishing youth program, 1979

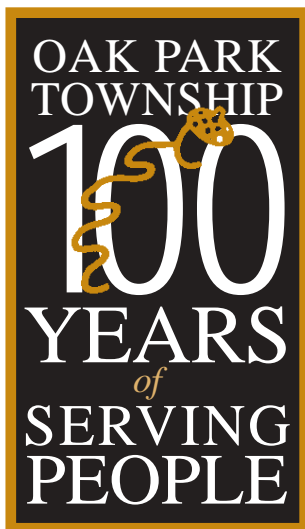
A Century of Service to the Oak Park Community

A homebound man answers his door and finds a volunteer with a hot meal and warm smile. A troubled teen gets the help he needs to kick his drug habit. A widow recovering from hip surgery regains her mobility with a wheelchair that has been provided free of charge. A cafeteria worker receives financial assistance so that he can live with dignity while he seeks new employment. A senior citizen joins her friends for lunch, some spirited conversation and group activities at the Senior Dining Center.

This is Oak Park Township. Since 1903, we've enhanced the lives of thousands of Oak Park residents—meeting their human needs with compassion and respect. We're proud of the fact that every one of our programs has evolved in response to a specific need in the community.

First and foremost, Oak Park Township and its programs are about helping people—which the township has been doing in one way or another for 100 years. As long as there are people in our Township, we'll be here to serve them. 🍁

Historic photographs courtesy of The Historical Society of Oak Park and River Forest; cover photograph of children fishing courtesy of Pioneer Press



Spring 2003

Oak Park Township News

Published in the spring and fall by:

Oak Park Township
105 South Oak Park Avenue
Oak Park, Illinois 60302

Supervisor

F. David Boulanger

Clerk

Gregory P. White

Assessor

Ali ElSaffar

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Mary T. Cozzens

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