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# **West Shore Meals on Wheels board members reflect on 50th anniversary**

Updated: Jul. 25, 2023, 9:47 a.m. | Published: Jul. 24, 2023, 9:23 p.m.



The Westshore Meals on Wheels Executive Board takes a break. Members express their feelings on the organization's upcoming 50th anniversary. From left, they are Joe Dister, Chris Polomsky, Lynda Kovach, Bill Ridman and Karen Conroy. Not pictured are Pat Bakos, Gabby Bauman, John Becker, Laurie Rokakis and Cheri Gardiner.



By [Linda Gandee](#)

ROCKY RIVER, Ohio -- With West Shore Meals on Wheels' 50th anniversary right around the corner, executive board members wanted to share their feelings about the program.

Following are edited statements from the director and each of the board members.

**Lynda Kovach, director**

"When I retired in 2017, I knew I wanted to use my extra time volunteering. I tried several different organizations, and West Shore Meals on Wheels offered me the opportunity I was looking for: a chance to give back to my community.

"I started as a Rocky River-Lakewood driver and found that a listening ear and a kind word means so much to our recipients. Their smiles are contagious.

"A year later, I was asked to be the recording secretary for the Fairview Park Unit. In 2019, I became the chairperson for the Rocky River-Lakewood Unit and an executive board member. With the unique experience of being involved with both kitchens, in 2020 I volunteered to be the director of WSMOW (West Shore Meals on Wheels) executive board.

"How lucky our organization is to have board members, staff and volunteers from all three entities who are willing to give 100 percent. They are passionate about our mission, open-minded, dependable and knowledgeable on a variety of topics.

"They have developed WSMOW into an organization that benefits the recipients and the communities we serve and deepened our relationship with donors who have become great supporters and incredible advocates.

"This year, we are celebrating our 50th year of service to Lakewood, Fairview Park and Rocky River. It is quite an accomplishment that since 1973, we have continued our mission of preparing and delivering freshly made, nutritious meals to thousands in our community who have called on us for assistance.

"I am so proud to be involved with individuals who have helped WSMOW achieve this milestone."

**Chris Polomsky, vice director and Fairview Park Unit chairperson**

“West Shore Meals on Wheels holds a special place in my heart. Back in 1973, my husband’s grandmother was receiving meals, and this gave me the inspiration to volunteer for this wonderful organization.

“I started with the Fairview Park kitchen in 2015 as a substitute kitchen volunteer and, after six months, I got my permanent day, Wednesday.

“I worked closely with Rita Conroy, who was then the assistant cook. I took over in the kitchen upon her death. I have been working in the kitchen as the assistant cook ever since.

“Seeing the homemade meals being prepared from scratch and receiving thank-you notes from the recipients brings so much satisfaction.

“I also learned a lot from the then Fairview Park Unit chairperson, Jean Snook, and in 2017 I took over for her when she retired.

“Throughout all these years, West Shore Meals on Wheels has been a rewarding experience for me.”

**Laurie Rokakis, board member and Rocky River-Lakewood Unit chairperson**

“I had just retired as the community outreach social worker for the elderly at the Rocky River Senior Center when a past chairperson, Lauren Walsh, called me to ask me to consider filling the vacant position of chairperson for the Rocky River-Lakewood kitchen.

“I had been a frequent guest at their meetings, and so I knew many of the board members. As a social worker, I knew how important a resource Meals on Wheels was for the community, especially for the elderly and disabled.

“West Shore Meals on Wheels enabled this population to remain in their homes, something most aging people want to do.

“The food had a good reputation, and there was a robust volunteer community, so in 2020 I said yes.

“COVID certainly made things more challenging, but, except for a few days, our kitchen continued to cook and deliver meals throughout the pandemic.

“Our staff, volunteers and board members are all dedicated to providing meals for the most vulnerable in our community. They are truly the backbone of our kitchen.”

**Bill Ridmann, treasurer**

“I joined West Shore Meals on Wheels approximately seven years ago. I started volunteering as a driver to deliver meals, then I transitioned to being the biller to recipients that were getting meals from the Rocky River-Lakewood kitchen.

“After this position, I transitioned to becoming treasurer for the organization. I originally volunteered to give back to the community in which I resided for approximately 40 years.

“Having a son with developmental disabilities, my wife and I realize the importance of community support and we wanted to provide service and support to those in the community that have a need at this time in their lives.”

**Karen Conroy, recording secretary**

“I saw a request in the St. Christopher Church bulletin and was looking for ways to make more of a contribution to the community. I initially volunteered for the Rocky River-Lakewood kitchen but, due to work constraints, I could not volunteer on a regular basis.

“When I got the call a year later to join the executive board as recording secretary, I knew it would be a great fit.

“Both the Rocky River-Lakewood kitchen and the WSMOW director were very enthusiastic about their work, and I could just hear in their voices how much they believed in the organization. WSMOW also seemed like a very well-oiled machine, and I knew it was something I wanted to be a part of.

“I am so glad I joined the executive board. It has been rewarding, enlightening and provides a unique perspective on life. Everyone on the board believes in its purpose, and that is contagious. Additionally, the entire board and volunteers are very compassionate toward recipients and doing what is best for the organization.

“I witnessed firsthand the real impact of WSMOW when I recently contacted the Rocky River-Lakewood kitchen for an elderly neighbor and friend who recently lost his wife. He lost a tremendous amount of weight, and he knew he needed prepared meals on a regular basis.

“Both Kathy Blackwell and Mary Haggard were so understanding and responsive. I was amazed at their kindness and compassion!

“While I have only been on the board since November 2022, I hope to enjoy many more years with this impactful organization.”

**Joe Dister, board member and technology consultant**

“I decided to volunteer for West Shore Meals on Wheels when I purchased my first home in Fairview Park two years ago. I wanted to set roots here, and I thought it would be a great way to have an impact in my community, give back and meet people.

“Also, I’m always trying to improve my cooking skills to impress my wife.

“I was asked to be on the executive board because I have a background in IT, and I was happy to be able to apply my skill set to the organization.

“As a mission-driven individual, I don’t think your budget should dictate the quality of IT service you receive, especially as a nonprofit. There are efficiencies and expertise that only bigger companies can afford.

“I feel honored to be able to provide that expertise as a board member to help West Shore achieve its goals and level the playing field with bigger nonprofits.

“The volunteer service makes me proud to live in my community. I live on a street with a recipient from Fairview Park kitchen, and it makes me happy knowing that they can get healthy meals delivered to their home when they aren’t able to get out themselves.

“Whether it’s Meals on Wheels or any of the other amazing nonprofits in our area, I encourage everyone to be active in their community. We’re all experts in something and we can all have meaningful impact.

“The national narrative is that we’re more divided than ever, but it’s funny, because when I’m volunteering in our kitchen, I’ve never talked politics with a fellow cook. We share stories and recipes, listen to music and drink coffee together.

“Thinking and acting locally has a way of making you feel connected.”

**John Becker, purchasing agent**

“I worked in fresh-food manufacturing for over 25 years. During that time, we exhibited at many food shows and expos, where I had an opportunity to meet several Meals on Wheels affiliates around the country. All the representatives always seemed kind and generous.

“When I retired in 2021, I contacted Kathy Blackwell at the Rocky River-Lakewood kitchen after visiting the website and realizing they were looking for kitchen volunteers. I knew my food experience would be of use to the organization.

“Once I met Kathy, Andrea Molnar, the head cook, as well as the other volunteers in the kitchen, I knew this would be a great way to give back to those in need in the community.

“I started volunteering in the Rocky River-Lakewood kitchen in September 2021. In spring of 2022, I became aware of an opening for a purchasing agent, as the former board member, Jim Gross, would be retiring.

“Jim explained all the duties and processes needed for the role, and I took over on Jan. 1, 2023.

“To me, it’s all about community. All the folks I have met in the organization, whether kitchen volunteers, driver volunteers or executive board members, are among the most thoughtful and kind people I have ever seen.

“I know we provide a meal service for our recipients, but the care that goes into executing that service is no simple task. I am fortunate to be able to give back to those in need, and it helps provide me with a sense of purpose.”

**Pat Bakos, board member**

“My next-door neighbor was a delivery person for the Fairview Park kitchen but was having difficulty with stairs and asked me to come with him to do the actual delivery. I did, and when he retired from Fairview Park kitchen shortly thereafter, I took over his route.

“That was 17 years ago.

“Several of ‘my people,’ as I call them, live in apartments, and I know I’m the only person they see that day. I think of it as a welfare check as well as delivering healthy meals. It’s my favorite day of the week.”

**Cheri Gardiner, board member**

“West Shore Meals on Wheels reached out for help with billing. Based on the organization’s well deserved strong reputation, Wendy Summers and I signed up to share the job.

“Getting to know the mission better has deepened our commitment and led to my joining the board and representing the Rocky River-Lakewood kitchen on the executive board.

“Providing nutritious meals is a powerful way to improve people’s health and well-being. It takes a village to deliver good food and warm friendship to our clients every weekday. I am proud to be part of the organization giving back to our community.”

*Read more from the [West Shore Sun](#).*

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