

Winter 2025

DONKA DIGEST

Board Member, Veteran, Volunteer of the Year!

We are proud to share that West Suburban Philanthropic Network (WSPN) named Donka Board Member, Jim Benzin, as their 2025 *Nonprofit Volunteer of the Year!* He was awarded this honor at WSPN's 23rd Annual Philanthropy Awards held on August 28, 2025 at College of DuPage



There is truly no one more deserving of this recognition; Jim's commitment to veterans and people with disabilities shines through everything he does.

A U.S. veteran himself, Jim has spent more than 50 years advocating for and serving veterans—and his commitment continues today through his unwavering volunteerism with Donka as a Board Member, along with his role in the VETSO group, helping disabled veterans at the DuPage Care Center.

As a former teacher, Jim found ways to instill compassion and service in the next generation, even encouraging his students to collect items for veterans at the Hines VA Hospital.

Jim exemplifies what it means to be a service leader. He brings heart, energy, (cntd.)

and passion to everything he does. He has helped shape Donka's growth and impact in just the three years he has served on our board.

Jim's lifelong service to veterans, his deep belief in our mission, and his relentless volunteer efforts make him not only the perfect candidate for Nonprofit Volunteer of the Year—but a living example of the best our community has to offer.

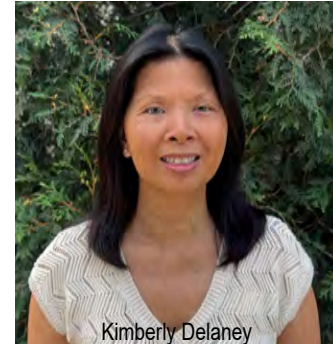
We also salute all the other award honorees of the 2025 Philanthropy Awards. The work being done in our community—supporting people with disabilities, veterans, seniors, and individuals facing all types of challenges—reminds us just how powerful community can be.



Donka 2025 Board Members

- ❖ Leanne Vos, *Executive Director*
- ❖ Rhonda Pavicich, *President*
- ❖ Robert Stewart, *Vice President*
- ❖ Flory Hoving, *Secretary*
- ❖ Abigail Taylor, *Treasurer*
- ❖ James Benzin
- ❖ Patrick Byrne
- ❖ Shauna Berman
- ❖ Glen Schwartz
- ❖ Rachel Stewart
- ❖ Jennifer Ulmer
- ❖ John Westra Broecker

Meet Our New Instructors



Kimberly Delaney

Kimberly Delaney has a B.S. in English from Marquette University. Prior to joining Donka, she held roles such as Programmer Analyst at Quaker Oats and Software Developer at Discover Card. Becoming completely blind in 2010, Kimberly graduated from Donka as a proficient JAWS user and brings a wealth of technical and personal expertise to her teaching. She is an ideal candidate to empower individuals with vision impairments, and we are excited to welcome her to the team.



Kyle Kania

Donka graduate, Kyle Kania spent 15 years in the printing industry as an Acrylic Portrait Artist. An aquarium and plant enthusiast, Kyle maintains seven aquariums at home and is well-known in the community for his terrarium-building workshops. Diagnosed with Limb-Girdle Muscular Dystrophy, Kyle is an active AT user and advocate for people with disabilities, and we're thrilled to welcome him back to Donka, this time as an instructor.

Student Spotlight

"Can't Be Broken" Dale Lewter



When Dale Lewter reflects on his life, you can feel the weight of his words. A veteran, a mentor, and now a student at Donka—Dale carries with him a philosophy forged by hardship, service, and survival. His journey is one of resilience, transformation, and the unshakable desire to give back.

Dale joined Donka's training program in June 2025 and is working with Donka instructor, John Strong, with one mission in mind: to gain the computer skills needed to transition into a new career path as a Recovery Support Specialist. "I was a computer dummy when I started," he admitted with a laugh, "but John is patient and a great teacher. I've learned more in ten minutes with him than I did with anyone else." But Dale's motivation runs deeper than acquiring skills.

Dale's passion is to work in social services, helping veterans and others struggling with mental health and substance abuse. He is driven by the same kind of help he once received—the desire to pass it forward. "One man changed my life, and I want to be the one man who does the same for someone else," he said, his voice breaking with emotion as he reflected on the road that brought him here.

Dale's military service spans 15 years, beginning his service as a mechanic and later cross-training into several roles, eventually becoming a drill sergeant.

But it was early in his basic training that he encountered a life-changing moment. "Two weeks in, I thought I made the biggest mistake of my life," he said. "People thought I was crazy. But my drill sergeant pulled me aside and said, 'Look son, you're not crazy, you're just scared. Hang in there, you'll be okay.' That was the first time anyone ever believed in me."

"He changed my life in one sentence," Dale said, and he lives by that strong belief, "The right thing said to the right person at the right time can change a life." (cntd.)

Throughout his post-military career, Dale has worn many hats—from managing limousine companies to delivering medical supplies—but every step has led toward a future in service that centers around his lifelong calling: saving lives. Today, Dale is determined to be a lifeline for those who feel alone. "People often say, 'I have nobody,' Dale shares, "but I want to be their somebody."

When asked what superpower he wishes he had, Dale's answer left me speechless in the most profound and heartwarming way. "I already have it. I save lives every day," he said. "I become that person they never had, guiding them on the right path."

People are often surprised when they hear Dale's story—his traumatic childhood, the battles he's fought—and then meet the man he has become despite what he's been through. It's that triumph that fuels his commitment to a life of service.

Throughout our conversation, Dale's voice often caught with emotion, but when asked to sum up his journey in one phrase, he smiled through the tears and said, "Can't be broken. Everyone's tried." Dale wears his past as a badge of honor—fueling his drive to be an unshakeable, unstoppable force for change. At Donka, we are deeply honored to be a part of Dale's story and to witness, firsthand, the truth behind his words

Ron Vertheen "Driven Beyond Sight"



When Ron Vertheen talks about life, there's a spark in his voice that makes you forget he's 70 years old or that he's blind. For 46 years, Ron owned and operated an auto body shop in Winfield, Illinois. Cars were his world. He built engines, painted cars, and even raced stock cars on the weekends.

But in 2022, everything changed. Ron began losing his vision suddenly and without clear explanation. Doctors suspected diabetic retinopathy and damage from years of welding, but no one could pinpoint the cause. "They told me my eyes looked worse than the surface of the moon," he recalled. (cntd.)

After two surgeries—one on each eye—his vision didn't improve but rather worsened. Though the prognosis was devastating, defeat was not in his vocabulary. "I don't have give-up in me," he declares.

Losing his vision meant giving up more than driving—it meant re-learning how to do everything in a different way. Simple tasks like grocery shopping and crossing the street became challenges that required new skills.

After his vision loss, the State of IL connected Ron with Donka to learn computer and technology skills. At first, Ron was hesitant to pursue training because he didn't even know how to type, but soon, that became his greatest accomplishment.

"Learning to type was the most exciting thing for me, and yes, I used to race cars," Ron admitted with a laugh. "I never thought I'd learn to type, but Donka showed me I'm still capable of learning."

His Donka instructor, Ann Byrne, quickly became his biggest supporters. "Ann is absolutely my favorite teacher I've ever had in my life," Ron continued, "She never lost faith in me and always encouraged me. No other teacher ever did that. Ann is the best asset for Donka, and I don't know what Donka will do when she retires."

In working with Ann, Ron also learned how to make Zoom calls, send emails, and other digital tools that keep him connected with loved ones. "Donka helped me keep my independence, and that was one thing I wasn't ready to lose when I lost my vision," he said.

Despite the challenges that came with vision loss, Ron maintains a contagious positivity. He often joked with Ann, "Being blind sure sucks, but there's no point in feeling pity about what you can't do. Figure out what you can do—and go do it."

After the training he received at Donka, Ron no longer shies away from new technology. Ron became an early adopter of the Ray-Ban Meta smart glasses and absolutely loves them. They give him the freedom to move through any environment with confidence—through spoken directions to navigate, identifying buildings and street signs with ease, and reading restaurant menus on his own.

Ron may no longer be able to drive, but he's still in the driver's seat. His story and positivity remind us that independence doesn't come from sight—it comes from staying revved up for what's next and going full throttle ahead.

Event Highlights

Donka was a charitable partner at **ROCKIN' FOR OUR VETS** Concert for Charity ft. Gary Sinise & the Lt. Dan Band



This July 12th concert, hosted by the West Suburban Foundation for Disabled Veterans (WSFDV) in partnership with the Gary Sinise Foundation, selected Donka as one of twenty benefiting charitable partner organizations that provide life-changing services for veterans facing various challenges. And where better to honor veterans than at Cantigny Park: a place rooted in military history and spirit.

A Public Service Announcement made by Donka's Executive Director, Leanne Vos, was featured during the concert, highlighting the vital work Donka does to support veterans with disabilities—through services like computer training and job placement assistance—and how contributions to our veterans program, Operation Brighter Future, help make a lasting difference.

Together, we're creating opportunities, offering hope, and building pathways to independence, one veteran at a time.

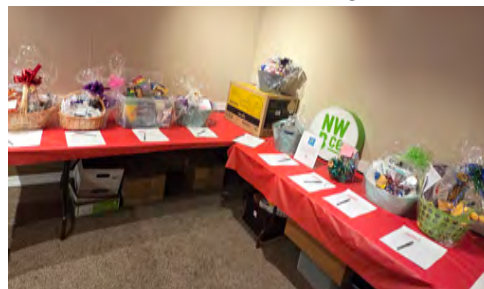


Donka graduate, Ben Penachio hosted seven events with his Job Coach throughout the Chicagoland area as a **ComEd Energy Force Ambassador**, promoting the importance of energy efficiency, inclusion and accessibility.



MISSION ACCOMPLISHED!

- ❖ 10 Valuable Sponsors
- ❖ 50+ Gracious Donors
- ❖ 19 Tin Can Raffles
- ❖ 21 Silent Auction Baskets
- ❖ 140+ Attendees
- ❖ ~\$14,000 Raised
- ❖ Infinite Lives Changed



Donka's Mission Possible Trivia Night Fundraiser on September 13, 2025 was an astounding success thanks to our sponsors, donors, and attendees, many of whom are from the Carol Stream and Greater DuPage and Kane County communities!

Our Trivia Night Hosts & Sponsors:

American Legion Post 76, Go 4 It Entertainment, Wheaton Bank & Trust, Rotary Club of Carol Stream, Greg Schwarze County Board-6, Neil Moscicki-Wintrust Investments, Hoving Recycling & Disposal, Joyce Van Der Molen, Jim Zay County Board-6, Jim & Peggy Benzin, VETSO (DuPage Care Center), VFW Post 10396



It is through vigorous fundraising, events like these, and supporters like you, Donka can offer *no-cost* computer and Assistive Technology (AT) training and job placement support to people with disabilities, veterans and seniors, over 80 percent of whom are low-income.

Every dollar raised at Donka is an investment in our mission; matching talent with opportunity, learning with independence, and compassion with community. But our mission doesn't end with Trivia Night.

This holiday season, match your attitude with your gratitude and join Donka in celebrating the power of giving to help us create more life-changing matches.

Can YOU Help Continue to Make Our MISSION POSSIBLE?

It's a Match This Giving Tuesday!

Help Donka Raise \$10,000 Before December 31, 2025!



Between 11/1 - 12/31, Donka is participating in the 2025 Coleman Foundation Challenge Grant Program—an incredible initiative where every dollar you give goes even further to help Donka's mission.



At Donka, we match students with dedicated instructors, jobseekers with meaningful opportunities, and most importantly, attitude with gratitude. Now, thanks to the Coleman Foundation, your generosity can be matched too! Here's how the Coleman match program multiplies your impact:

- ❖ • 1:1 match from individual donors
- ❖ • 2:1 match from corporations and businesses
- ❖ • 3:1 match from private foundations

Scan the QR code or visit us online at www.donkainc.org to donate today!

DONKA

Empowering Abilities Through Technology

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