

A Southeast Side leader's legacy

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Neil Bosanko

There's a TV movie "Who Will Love My Children?" in which Ann-Margret portrays a mother who finds out that she is dying who finds loving homes for each of her 10 children.

I thought of that movie when I heard about Neil Bosanko's plans for what appears to be his final days on Earth. Bosanko is the longtime executive director of the South Chicago Chamber of Commerce, but really he is much more than that. This is a guy who has had a lifelong love affair with his Southeast Side community. He has been relentless — sometimes getting people mad in the process, but always with good intentions — in trying to make it a better place for everyone, particularly children.

Bosanko, 57, learned March 30 he is suffering from pancreatic cancer that has spread to his liver and kidneys. Doctors give him four to seven months to live. News like that could make another person pull back or slow down. For Bosanko, it seems to have done the opposite. He's working hard to make sure his many favorite projects continue long after he is gone. Not because he needs them as his legacy, but because of their importance.

This shouldn't come as a surprise. From his earliest days, Bosanko was doing what he could for his community. At the living memorial held in his honor last weekend, his brother recalled how as a child he would be heading to Little League and Bosanko could be found sweeping the nearby viaduct.

About that living memorial: He didn't want accolades, tears. No, this was his vehicle to solidify the future of community efforts. He wanted — and got — community activists and representatives of other agencies to commit publicly to taking on projects. So many different things. Dollars and time were pledged for the dinners he has organized for 28 years at the YMCA so that the needy have somewhere to celebrate Thanksgiving, Christmas and Easter. Various chamber initiatives will go on, scholarships will be awarded, coat drives will continue.

I wanted to talk about Bosanko, the man, last week but he wouldn't hear of it.

No, he decided we were going to discuss South Chicago Neighborhood House. (He's insistent and pushy that way, which has been a good thing for South Chicago.) He wanted to talk about how Neighborhood House, open as a settlement house since 1919, was forced to close in June because of a lack of funding. But Bosanko, a former director there, understood the community needed Neighborhood House; it kept seniors involved and kids off the streets. As one young man at the living memorial said of Bosanko and his days at Neighborhood House: "Thank you for making my childhood better."

So Bosanko brokered a deal to reopen it, and now nearly 20 volunteers keep it open from 9 a.m. to 7:30 p.m. every day except Sunday. So seniors have a spot to gather and kids have a place to work with tutors. And at the living memorial, funding for a basketball program was announced.

He wouldn't accept praise for Neighborhood House's resurrection, crediting the community instead. That's Bosanko, the man.

There's so much to do but time is running short. Yet within Bosanko there seems to be an inner peace, knowing the work will go on even if he does not.