

# Oak Forest

## Neighbors

December 2020

**Helping Others 'Cope' is Her Life's Work**  
*Meet Kathryn Straniero*

Photo by Mary Compton



Best Version Media



# Helping others 'cope' is her life's work

## Meet Kathryn Straniero

By Rex Robinson | Photos by Mary Compton

*T*he sense of accomplishment in helping people when they need it most is something special. It takes a certain kind of person to do that work every day. Kathryn Straniero, director of Together We Cope, a prevention agency that provides resources to families in temporary crisis, is that special kind of person.

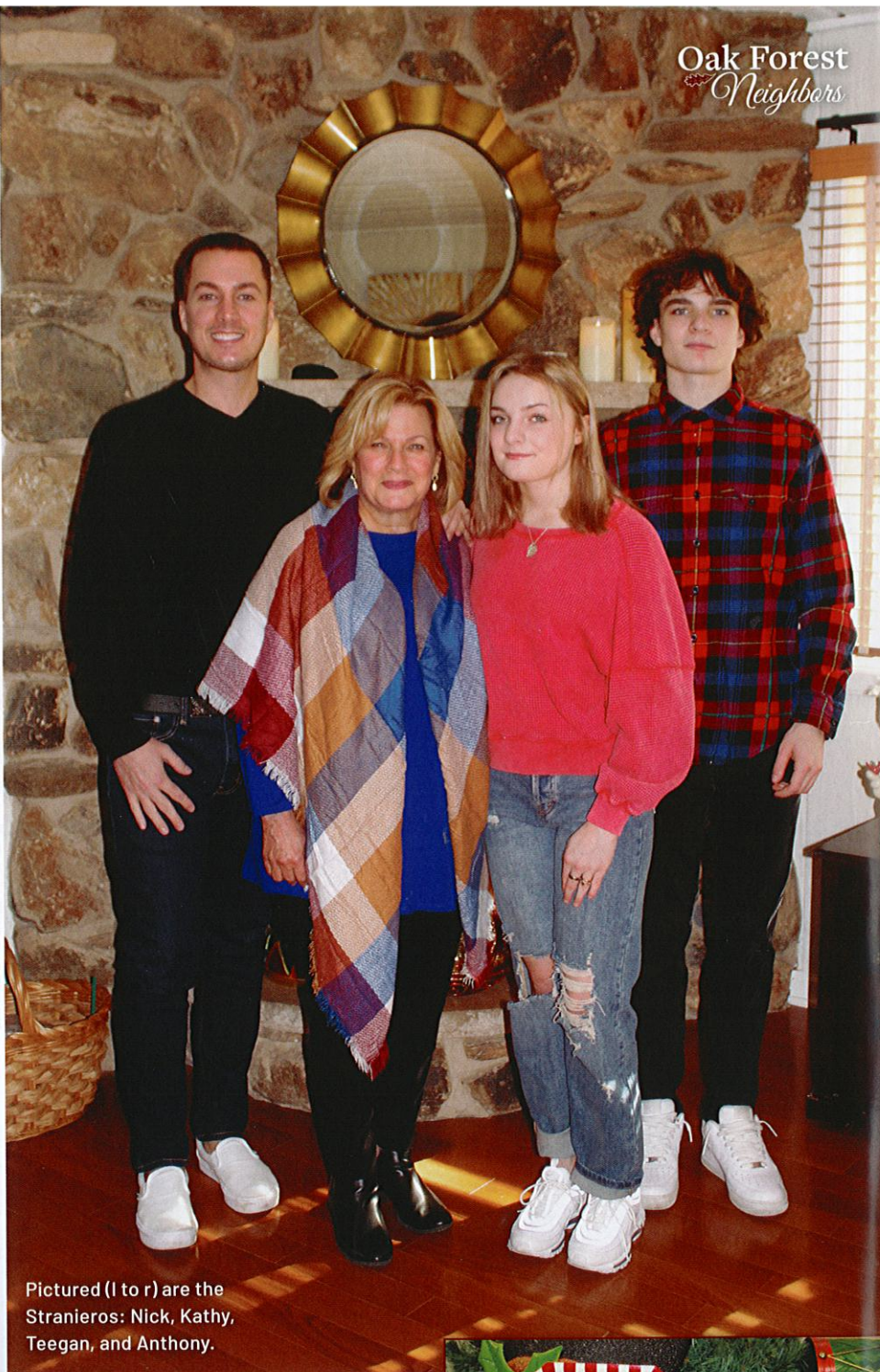
Together We Cope supplies food, shelter, clothing and referrals to south suburban residents in more than 20 communities. Since 1982, the agency has been "bridging the gap," and enabling people to stay in their homes until they are able to get back on their feet.

"The people that we help at Together We Cope are all our neighbors. We serve people in 22 communities within the townships of Bremen, Orland, Palos and Worth," Kathryn says. "The people who come to us need assistance with many things. Often, they have never had to ask for help before."

Kathryn and other team members at Together We Cope help people navigate through their crisis and provide stability in the form of financial assistance to those that meet funding guidelines for food, clothing and housing. The agency also has scattered site housing for homeless families and individuals throughout the southland.

"Our food pantry is our largest program, serving 65 to 80 families daily," says Kathryn, a long-time Oak Forest resident.

A major funding source for the agency is the New2U resales shop, 17010 Oak Park Ave., Tinley Park. The shop provides



Pictured (l to r) are the Stranieros: Nick, Kathy, Teegan, and Anthony.

clothing and household items to families in need and the general public. The proceeds help to fund client programs and operations. The shop was closed from March through July because of the Coronavirus pandemic, resulting in a loss of about \$96,000, according to Kathryn.

"Thanks to the generosity of our remarkable donors, we received enough support to get us through that lean time," she says.

With more than 200 volunteers, community donations of food, clothing



and household goods, and groceries purchased from the Greater Chicago Food Depository, the agency serves more than 1,500 families each month.



# Together We Cope Bridging the Gap

Kathryn Straniero is the director of Together We Cope, a prevention agency that provides resources to families in temporary crisis.



Kathryn lives in Oak Forest. She says her household is full. She has two sons, Jim 41, and Nick, 37, who both attended Oak Forest High School. Her grandchildren – Anthony, 16, and Teegan, 15 – also attend Oak Forest High School. She also has a 7-month-old grandson, Marcello, who does not live in her home. Anthony plays football and ran track, while Teegan is a varsity cheerleader who also ran track.

"They are both amazing children and I am ridiculously proud of them every day," she says.

The family also has two dogs – Hope, a border collie/lab mix, 11, and Cookie, a very large and active 1-year-old German shepherd.

"I am fortunate have my family near me. I don't know how I could be successful without them," Kathryn says.

Her husband Jim passed away 10 years ago. The two met in 1976 when Kathryn worked at First National Bank of Oak Lawn and he worked at Kole Pontiac right across the street. They were married in 1978. Both were from Oak Lawn.

Kathryn's family moved to Oak Lawn in 1959 from Chicago. Her father, Frank Spirito, was a pharmacist and had just opened his second store in Oak Lawn in the Ranch Manor shopping center. Her mother, Mimi Spirito, affectionately known to everyone as "Jackie" was the athlete of the family. She played tennis but excelled at golf and played on two leagues for many years.

Kathryn has one sister, Lee, who became a nurse. Lee is married to Bill, a dentist. They live and practice in Elmhurst. They both attended St. Linus grade school. Lee went to Mother McAuley while Kathryn attended St. Mary's Academy in South Bend, Ind.

"I think that I was incredibly fortunate that my parents valued the education that I would receive at SMA (as we called it). Living there for four years with people from across the United States and the world really contributed to who I am today," she says.

After high school Kathryn attended Marymount College, now Lynn

University, in Boca Raton, Fla. She says she didn't realize how fortunate she was to be able to attend college, especially out of state, and the sacrifices her parents made to send her there. She graduated from Marymount in 1972 with an Associate of Arts Degree in Liberal Arts.

She was accepted to the University of Miami in Coral Gables. However, she started working and did not go back to school until she was 40.

"My children were getting older and I knew I needed to get back to school before I re-entered the work force," she recalls. "I enrolled at Governors State University."

During those years a friend, the late Maggie Crotty, a former Illinois Senator, who was the Volunteer

Coordinator for Southwest Cooperative asked Kathryn to "help out" and she soon became the "picture lady."

About the same time there was an opening on the Arbor Park School District 145 school board, so she applied and was chosen. "I stayed on the school board for 17 years and worked with the most wonderful giving people. I always felt blessed to be in the company of educators and learned many of the things there that allowed me to be successful in my current position," she says.

Another friend, Deborah Van Kuiken, relentlessly pushed her to volunteer at Together We Cope. Kathryn says she often thought of going there but felt she had her hands full with school.

"To appease her I stopped in one day in 1994 to volunteer and walked out with a job," she recalls. "It was a complete surprise to me and to my husband."

Kathryn began by working part time in the resale shop and quickly became a caseworker. When the former director left suddenly in 1998, she became the interim director and then the executive director.

"I have always loved any job I held at Together We Cope. It is an absolute joy to work with the volunteers and staff that I have met while here," she says. "To work with people who only want to help elevate their fellow human beings is an amazing gift."

"I think I have done every job here at least once. Some of them I was not great at – I still can't transfer a call without asking someone," Kathryn quipped.

She also had an opportunity to run for trustee on the Bremen Township board and has served on that board for almost 16 years.



Frank Trombley, president of Together We Cope board of directors with Kathy at the Together We Cope offices.



The Stranieros with their dog Hope.

Continued on Page 8





"I still run into people that my oldest son played ball with and have fond memories of our time spent together at games," she recalls.

When Kathryn began the second chapter of her life she took on the job of raising her young grandchildren and was once again at the bus stop running back and forth to school and sporting events.

"I discovered that the next generation of parents were just like us," she says. "They hold the same beliefs and value family above all else. They are tremendous advocates for their children and our town. They look out for one another fearlessly. Not only am I accepted and welcomed, but their children call me 'Gram.' I believe the values that Oak Forest has are passed on from generation to generation. It makes me feel like I have known them for years and should give us all a sense of hope for the future."

The pandemic, she adds, has been a challenge for everyone and Together We Cope is no different.

"Through team meetings and a decision by all to stay open no matter what, we are determined to continue our mission to help all who are in need," Kathryn says. "We know that we play a small part in stabilizing our communities, but we believe we do make a difference in the lives of the families that come to us and to us that is enough."

"Two of the things I learned from my experiences both at school and the township, are that you must be fair across the board in your decision making and it is harder to do the right thing than the wrong one," she says.

Kathryn lives in the El Morro subdivision near the library, park district, police and fire departments. She says she is grateful to live in a place where safety is a top priority. The family has lived in the home since 1980. The neighbors and sense of community that Oak Forest fosters, she adds, are the reason she stays there. The athletic teams her own children played on and, now their children, are filled with camaraderie, she says, adding that she gives major props to the Oak Forest Park District.

**AWARD WINNING CHILI & FAMOUS CHILI CHEESE DOG!** 

**DOUG'S COMBO MEAL SPECIAL**  
INCLUDES FRIES + REGULAR DRINK

**HOT DOGS • BEEF • BURGERS • TAMALES**

<b>#1</b> <b>CHICKEN ON PITA</b> <b>\$6.50</b>	<b>#2</b> <b>2 HOT DOGS</b> <b>\$6.50</b>
<b>#7</b> <b>GYRO BURGER</b> <b>\$6.50</b>	<b>#4</b> <b>DOUBLE CHEESEBURGER</b> <b>\$6</b>

**FREE DELIVERY AVAILABLE!** **6200 W. 159th ST.**  
**Oak Forest, IL 60452**

**708-687-1122**  
MON-SAT 11 am-9 pm • Sunday 11 am-7 pm  
**f www.DougsDogsOF.com**

**NICKY V**  
OF OAK FOREST, ILLINOIS



**Dreaming Up the Ideal Retirement Is Your Job. Helping You Get There is Ours.**

To learn more about why Edward Jones makes sense for you, call my office today.



**Ken Castillo**  
Financial Advisor  
6800 Centennial  
Dr Suite B  
Tinley Park, IL 60477  
708-429-0780



**Dan McHugh**  
Financial Advisor  
15000 Cicero Ave.  
Suite 103  
Oak Forest, IL 60452  
708-925-9565

**Edward Jones**  
MAKING SENSE OF INVESTING