

# The Passions Project

Capturing lives filled with enthusiasm, vitality and meaning

*Words and photos by Heidi Wagner*



Though the photos on these pages capture other people's passions, my own interest — photography — led me here. I embarked on The Passions Project with a clear but challenging purpose: to shift the paradigm of how people view aging in our culture.

For 11 years, I worked at a retirement community in Boulder, Colorado, where the residents inspired me every day. They were always engaged in interesting activities, sharing stories of travel adventures or making me jealous with how they were living their best life.

Imagine my surprise when I would proudly tell others about my work, and they would respond negatively, saying that it must be depressing, which was far from the truth. Their reactions showed me the gap between my engaging experience and people's attitude about aging.

The people I met in the retirement community lived life with purpose. They inspired me to tell a different story of aging in the only way I knew how, by picking up my camera. I was on a mission. I wanted to tell the real story of living and following your passion.

When you see someone living their passion, you see what motivates them and inspires them to keep going. You notice their age secondarily, if at all. The passion itself, be it squash or dancing, ends up fostering connections between people of all ages, including younger people who may not see themselves as having anything in common with older adults.

These pages feature photos of older Chicagoans living their lives with purpose. I hope in these images you see the real story of aging — living robustly, vibrantly, passionately.



## Stu Katz

*Jazz pianist and vibraphonist*

Photographed at his winter apartment in Los Angeles

SOME OF CHICAGOAN STU KATZ'S passions are quiet. He loves his family, his former career as a corporate attorney and complicated word puzzles. But there's one passion you can't miss: jazz.

"I have been a working jazz musician for over 65 years. Thankfully, it's a passion I can indulge myself in even at my age, which is 82," Katz says.

Katz comes from a musical family. His mother taught herself how to play piano by ear, and his father, a traveling salesman, was a vaudeville tap dancer before he settled down and got married.

Katz started playing piano by ear when he was 3 years old. Later when he tried to learn to read music, he struggled. "I couldn't take lessons or discipline myself to read music.

But if I heard most songs played one time through, I almost always could play them," he says.

When Katz was 15 years old, he started playing vibraphone with a dance band whose repertoire consisted of popular music, such as the compositions of Cole Porter, Irving Berlin and George Gershwin. After that, he started going to local jam sessions where he would listen to, meet and eventually work with Chicago's finest jazz musicians, playing vibraphone and piano.

His friendship and musical partnership with trumpeter and saxophonist Ira Sullivan has lasted through the decades. "We started performing together when I was 17 years old, and we performed together as recently as last year," Katz says.

Katz has played professionally in all kinds of jazz venues, including clubs, jazz cruises, festivals and other organized public concerts. "As long as my passion is burning brightly and my health permits," he says, "I can and will still perform." >>>





## Jim Lew

### *Enthusiast*

Photographed at his home in Rogers Park, Chicago

**CHICAGOAN JIM LEW** is a consummate storyteller, bursting with interesting stories from throughout his life. Indeed, everything Lew does seems to turn into his latest passion.

His tales start with spending his

childhood in his parents' Chinese restaurant on Route 66 in Amarillo, Texas. He's full of fascinating stories about working as a teacher trainer on the Pine Ridge Indian Reservation in South Dakota. And then there's the period of time he made drums for Mickey Hart from the Grateful Dead and hung out backstage with the band.

When Lew headed to Grinnell College in the late 1960s, he had dreams of becoming a medical researcher,

but as Lew explains, that was one career he didn't do. Instead, he became "the long-haired radical student body president."

After he met Saul Alinsky, a Chicago-based community activist, Lew turned to community organizing. He also was a substitute teacher at Cooley Vocational High School. Through his experiences, he learned that people need to create conversations and connections with others — a skill he currently uses as a





## Penny Brown

*Art collector and philanthropist*

Photographed at her Gold Coast home, Chicago

**WALKING INTO ART COLLECTOR** and philanthropist Penny Brown's home is like walking into an art gallery. Her collection is eclectic and vast, and Brown is an engaging tour guide, pointing out her personal connections to each piece or to each artist.

For Brown, art is personal. "Collecting art is something I do for me," she says. Every piece of art has a story that reveals a bit about Brown, whether it's a story about people she has met or adventures she has had on her way to falling in love with an artist or artwork.

She also has a passion for helping others. "My main passion is helping kids who wouldn't otherwise be able to go to school, go to school," Brown says. She supports scholarships at several schools, sits on university boards and is an adviser for a camp for intercity kids. In this coronavirus era, she says supporting students and charitable organizations is more important than ever.

Brown recognizes the creativity and possibility of others. "I collect art because when I see a white wall, I see a white wall," she says. "When an artist sees a white wall, they see possibility. I respect that creative impulse."

She adds, "Art to me encompasses everything: history, literature, story, color, narrative, non-narrative. You can stand in front of a painting for hours and talk about it. You can take away a story that you didn't even know was there." >>>



volunteer cultural diversity trainer with the Chicago Police Department.

Indeed, Lew is a man who wears many hats — literally. When he worked on the reservation, people would give him hats, which he displays proudly in his home.

"I'm a raving extrovert," Lew says. "My job is to see the best in every human being. I believe that people are great, and it is my goal to get them to see themselves through my eyes."



## Susan Trice

*Dancer*

Photographed at Deeply Rooted Dance Theater, Chicago

**AS A CHILD GROWING UP** on the South Side of Chicago, Susan Trice wanted to dance. But, as the oldest of six kids with two working parents, pursuing that dream wasn't possible.

Trice never let up on her vision, though. And eight years ago, when she was seeking an outlet for her creative

energy, she found that means of expression through Deeply Rooted Dance Theater and the Mature H.O.T. Women dance group — HOT stands for health conscious, optimistic and triumphant.

"[Dance has] healed me, comforted me," she says. "It allows me to express myself. It helps me discover parts of myself that I didn't know were there and to be in a community of amazing women."

When you meet people deeply connected to themselves and who are passionate about their life, they rarely have only one passion. Trice is a perfect

example. She also swims several times a week and serves as president of her quilters guild.

Trice has a calming presence. Through dance, she exudes love, hope and compassion.

"Dance is something that allows you to express yourself without words. It allows me to fully express myself and to be seen and validated in the work that I do," she says. "At this time in my life, being able to dance, I get so much more from it. It's almost a religious experience for me."







## Nick Scarpelli

*Chicago Cubs fan*

Photographed at Central Baptist  
Village, Norridge

**NICK SCARPELLI GREW UP** on the North Side, cheering for the Chicago Cubs. He's a lifelong, passionate fan who traces his love of baseball and the Cubs back to his father.

Scarpelli fondly remembers how his dad would take him, his four brothers and his sister to Cubs games as often as possible. They'd walk to Wrigley Field, and the siblings could predict their father's mood

by whether the game was a W or an L.

"He was always in a good mood walking to the ballpark," Scarpelli recalls. "He would whistle and have a spring in his step. But if the Cubs lost, on the walk home he would be silent and only walk in the back alleys."

Scarpelli has been to hundreds of games at Wrigley Field and religiously watches the Cubs on TV at his home in Central Baptist Village. On many days, you'll see him proudly wearing his Ernie Banks T-shirt and one of his favorite Cubs hats.

Scarpelli is proud to be a North Sider

and a Cubs fan. He and his brother Joe owned the Original Joe's sandwich shop on the Northwest Side of Chicago, which was famous for its Italian beef sandwich. Scarpelli's son would often joke that Italian beef put him through college. When you ask Scarpelli what made the sandwich so good, he says, "The secret is in the sauce."

Of course, one of greatest moments for Scarpelli was seeing the Cubs win the World Series in 2016. "I never thought it would happen in my lifetime, but I am so glad it did," he says. "It feels great, especially after all those years of disappointment." >>>

## Robert Minetz

*Squash player*

Photographed at the  
University Club of Chicago

**AMID THE THUNK** of the ball hitting the wall and the squeak of court shoes, Chicagoan Robert Minetz sits in the lounge at the University Club talking about — what else? — squash.

A regular morning player, Minetz gets on the court at least three or four times a week (when there's not a pandemic). Although he started playing squash only about five years ago, he

has a racquetball background.

"I rely on my racquetball skills and a good serve to generally beat fellow 70-year-olds," says Minetz, who loves a challenge. "Sometimes we play with special rules to make the game interesting, and so we play longer rallies."

The games are fast, Minetz says, which adds to the competition. "It's amazing to me how fast you can lose a squash game, since a player scores on every rally. If you make a couple of errors, in 45 seconds you can be down by six points and the game only goes to 11."

While squash is a lesser-known sport

in the U.S., it's popular internationally.

The sport has many benefits: It promotes heart health, strength and flexibility. People can also play it year-round, as well as throughout their lives.

And Minetz can certainly hold his own on the court. He recently won his age group at the 2020 Illinois State Championships, and a couple of years ago, he won a skill-level club tournament.

"I love the quality of the workout, notwithstanding the soreness after the match," he says. "I love the competition and the adrenaline rush that is part of the competition."







## Dean Banick

*Zoo volunteer*

Photographed at Lincoln Park Zoo, Chicago

**DEAN BANICK'S SWEET SMILE** hints at his passion for engaging with people and animals.

Banick, who lives at The Admiral at the Lake in Chicago, has been a volunteer docent at the Lincoln Park Zoo for 21 years. After he retired from his career as a commercial banker, he immediately signed up to volunteer at the zoo and at the Art Institute of Chicago.

"When I retired, I knew I would need something to do, so I picked my favorite things: working with animals and art," he says.

His love of animals runs deep. Until seventh grade, he grew up living on a farm in Rochester, Minnesota, where he had a pet lamb and calf and took care of many different animals.

As a tour guide at the zoo, Banick helps visitors deepen their appreciation for the animals.

"I love the giraffe house best — they are such interesting animals. But I also enjoy the reptile house, too," he says.

At the giraffe house, he rattles off fun facts about giraffes, such as what they like to eat and how they have the same number of vertebrae in their necks as humans. He also talks about the types of giraffes and how long they've been at the zoo.

Banick is passionate not only about animals, but also about interacting with visitors, asking them questions and stimulating their enthusiasm.

"I love being around people," he says. "I became a zoo ambassador so that I could talk to visitors about the animals. It combines several of my passions." ©



*For more from The Passions Project, see page 56.*