

Remarkable Woman: Jennifer Molski

Her regifting organization, Leave It for Love, recycles joy

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Jennifer Molski loves this quote from Martin Luther King Jr.: "Everybody can be great ... because anybody can serve. You don't have to have a college degree to serve. You don't have to make your subject and verb agree to serve. You only need a heart full of grace. A soul generated by love." (Heather Charles, Chicago Tribune)

There comes a time in everyone's life when you receive a gift you won't use. Maybe it's a candle with a fragrance you don't like. Or an oddly patterned scarf that doesn't go with anything in your wardrobe. Or soap-on-a-rope, a mug tree, footed pajamas ... whatever it is, you know it when you see it.

You also know that it's going to sit on a shelf in the closet — or perhaps guiltily regifted.

Jennifer Molski knows all this too. That's why she decided to create the perfect home for all those unwanted but perfectly usable gifts: presents for low-income or isolated elderly adults.

"We give out little things that make people happy," she says, explaining the impetus for Leave It for Love (leaveitforlove.org), the nonprofit organization she created 10 years ago.

What exactly will *they* do with that candle or scarf? They may love either item. But that actually matters less than the experience of receiving a gift, something that may rarely if ever happen, Molski says.

"I found myself having a lot of stuff, and it started to get to be a little much in my studio," Molski says. "I thought to myself, 'There's got to be someone who could put this stuff to better use.' I used to work with mentally ill older adults as a social worker. So I thought, 'What if I could direct these gifts to someone who could make better use of them?'"

Molski went to her dry cleaner in the Gold Coast and asked if it could be a drop-off location for new and gently used gifts that she would bring to the Little Brothers — Friends of the Elderly (littlebrothers.org) organization. That was 10 years ago.

The program currently has drop-off sites in the city and south suburbs, where donated items run the gamut from gently used sweaters to brand-new toiletry sets, and rarely is anything turned away. Little Brothers hosts parties every month where they distribute the gifts that "make people happy."

Molski does this for a hobby (she works full time for her husband's Web-based consulting business), but it's a family affair. Her sister-in-law does the marketing, her husband manages the website, and her parents help with pickups and delivery.

Molski's niece started a Leave It for Love program in Cincinnati, and another sister-in-law is launching one in San Diego. This year, they expect to distribute a few hundred gifts to the elderly living in Illinois.

Following is an edited version of our conversation.

Q: What are some of the gifts that you collect and redistribute?

A: We've given thousands of gifts, ranging from a fancy bar of soap to a tea set. One of my contacts says there was a family whose elderly grandmother had passed away just before Christmas a few years ago. They had already purchased gifts for her and couldn't bear the thought of returning them. They gave them to Leave It for Love and distributed the gifts in memory of their grandmother.

Q: Tell me about some of the funnier gifts you've gotten.

A: We've gotten a Clapper (a sound-activated on/off switch), a battery-operated chicken that (dances to) the "Chicken Dance" and a liquor dispenser.

Q: Why is it so important for you to help the elderly?

A: I feel that they're living treasures. They have so much to offer about life and history, and they're an often neglected population.

Q: You and your husband have two dogs?

A: My husband and I like helping older dogs who may have a harder time getting adopted. I have two dogs I adopted, and they're (both) 8 years old. Maggie is a Shih Tzu and Buster is a springer spaniel, though he is deaf, so we tell people they can call him whatever they'd like. Maggie was in hospice care because she had cancer, but we gave her a surgery and she's now cancer-free. We hope she'll live a lot longer.

Q: How did you meet your husband?

A: We went to the same high school but didn't know each other because he is six years older than me. Seven years ago, his mother and my best friend were having Thanksgiving dinner together, when he called his mother to ask her for instructions about how to cook the turkey he was making for his friends. My friend asked his mother to set us up, and we got married five years ago on Dec. 28. For Valentine's Day in 2007, he created my Leave It for Love website.

Q: Does he still make the Thanksgiving dinner?

A: He does most of the cooking, but I assist and do the dishes.

Q: Your life seems to revolve around the holidays.

A: I love the holidays. I just started another holiday charity three years ago, which involves tree recycling. I had just moved to Flossmoor after living in Printers Row, and I couldn't believe that people just threw their trees on the curb every January. So I reached out to our nature preserve to see if they could recycle the trees by chipping them, mulching them and distributing (the mulch) on the 33 acres of paths and trails. The first year, we recycled about 500 trees. The second year, we did about 600. ... Last year, we added holiday light recycling and (recycled) 500 pounds of lights.

Q: So this is your busy season — what do you do for fun when it's not holiday time?

A: I dabble in athletics. I did three triathlons and some marathons. I've also done the Hustle Up the Hancock to raise money for a lung association charity (the Respiratory Health Association of Metropolitan Chicago).

Q: That doesn't sound like dabbling.

A: Well, I did the marathon in 5 hours and 20 minutes, which isn't great. It was for a charity. I love to swim and bike, but running is OK.

Q: Do you do anything that's not for a charity?

A: It's really important to give back. I feel strongly about all of us doing our part, and that's all I'm trying to do. I'm happy and blessed that I can be of service to others.

To find drop-off sites for gifts, go to leaveitforlove.org; the Christmas tree and holiday light recycling will be conducted from 9 a.m. to noon Dec. 29 and Jan. 5 at Irons Oaks, 20000 Western Ave., Olympia Fields (ironsoaks.com).

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