

## Wheat Ridge Mentor's Efforts Recognized

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*By Mike McKibbin / Neighborhood Gazette / July 1, 2025*

Mentoring is something Karen O'Donnell has done for 15 years. But she never thought she'd win an award for helping others grow and find their way in life.

The Wheat Ridge Parks and Recreation Department director for the last six years, O'Donnell will receive the Dirk Richwine Professional Mentoring Award at the 2025 National Recreation and Park Association's annual conference in Orlando, Fla., in September.

"I'm beyond humbled and completely surprised to have received this incredible national recognition for mentoring!" O'Donnell posted on her LinkedIn profile. "Mentorship has always been something I'm passionate about and to be honored in this way is truly one of the greatest milestones of my career."

The award is presented to someone "who has made outstanding contributions through mentoring of individuals and organizations to strengthen the field by helping other professionals grow, develop and flourish, and by better preparing the next generation of parks and recreation leaders," according to the NRPA's website.

O'Donnell said she found out she won the award at a recent city staff meeting. Colleagues and those she reports to nominated O'Donnell and former colleagues in Commerce City wrote letters of support, along with the Colorado Parks and Recreation Association and NRPA's Supervisors' Management School, which O'Donnell completed.

### **Helping a young girl and a parks and rec staffer**

After she moved to Colorado in 2011, O'Donnell started mentoring with the Big Brothers Big Sisters of Colorado program. It matches children facing adversity with adults who develop strong and enduring, professionally supported, one-to-one relationships to try to improve their mentee's lives for the better.

“My amazing little sister, Camryn, and I met when she was just 10 years old,” O’Donnell posted on LinkedIn. “I loved every minute of our journey together. While we no longer meet regularly (she’s an adult now), we’ve kept in touch and love spending time catching up!”

In an interview with the Gazette, O’Donnell said she and Camryn took part in the program’s Sports Buddies activities they both enjoyed.

“It just seemed to also intersect with my parks and recreation background and in girls’ sports,” she stated.

O’Donnell added Camryn’s mother was among those who congratulated her on the award.

As a parks and recreation professional, O’Donnell continued mentoring through NRPA and Colorado Parks and Recreation Association programs, most recently with a young staff member at the Apex Parks and Recreation District in Arvada.

Mentoring is a two-way street, O’Donnell said, with both learning something from the other.

“I had him meet with our forestry teams and he got to experience going up in a bucket truck” used to trim trees, she recalled. “And I visited the ice rink he’s in charge of in Arvada. And I rode in their Zamboni. An ice rink is something I’ve never had the opportunity to oversee.”

“I’ve always been interested in volunteering and I’ve loved mentoring throughout my career,” she said. “It all comes together when you get to help someone see a path forward.”

### **From Ohio to New York to Wheat Ridge**

O’Donnell was born in Cleveland, Ohio. She earned her bachelor’s degree in therapeutic recreation from Ohio University in Athens, Ohio, and a master’s degree in public administration from Mercy University in Dobbs Ferry, N.Y.

After several years as an adjunct professor at Mercy, O’Donnell was an assistant superintendent in the Rye, N.Y., Recreation Department and recreation division manager in Commerce City before joining Wheat Ridge in 2019.

O’Donnell also served as president of the Wheat Ridge-based Colorado Parks and Recreation Association and is certified as a parks and recreation executive and a therapeutic recreation specialist.

Her interest in the parks and recreation field also grew out of a rafting trip and opportunities such as overseeing a summer camp, O’Donnell added.

“I’ve always been outdoors-oriented,” she said. “I like things like hiking, kayaking, just exploring.”

She decided to relocate to Colorado to further her career.

“I didn’t really love New York; I liked New York but I still wanted to move forward and Colorado seemed like a good place to do that,” O’Donnell stated.

Now, she feels at home in Wheat Ridge.

“I love working in a city the size of Wheat Ridge and the collaborative approach we have with the people here,” O’Donnell said. “We’re updating our master plan and we get very good engagement from people who are very active in our programs. The number of responses we get really blows what other programs get out of the water.”

Currently, O’Donnell is looking forward to the completion of the Green at 38th project in July.

The nearly two-acre park, between Stevens Elementary School, 7101 W. 38th Ave., and West 38th Avenue, the city’s “Main Street”, will include a stage/outdoor classroom, civic green space, festival promenade for vendors, playground, two fire pits, a game grove, seating areas, significantly more trees and other landscaping, plus public art and a community art wall. It is a joint city and school project.

A grand opening with live music and family events is being planned for September, O’Donnell noted.

“I really think it’s going to be a great highlight for this community,” she said of the new park. “I’m really looking forward to everything we have going on in this department. I love being a part of it.”