

# around town

Modeled after the Before I Die interactive art project, Newton South High School is home to **My Dream is To...** interactive chalkboards walls.

About the Before I Die art project:

### What matters most to you?

Before I Die is an interactive public art project that invites people to share their personal aspirations in public. After losing someone she loved and falling into depression, Candy Chang created this experiment on an abandoned house in her neighborhood to create an anonymous place to help restore perspective and share intimately with her neighbors. The project gained global attention and thanks to passionate people around the world, over 1,000 “Before I Die” walls have now been created in over 70 countries, including Kazakhstan, Iraq, Haiti, China, Ukraine, Portugal, Japan, Denmark, Argentina and South Africa. The walls are an honest mess of the longing, pain, joy, insecurity, gratitude, fear and wonder you find in every community, and they reimagine public spaces that nurture honesty, vulnerability, trust and understanding. The *Before I Die* book is a celebration of these walls and the stories behind them.



# meet your Neighbor

## A PORTRAIT AND INTERVIEW: MARK SCHUSTER, *The Mayor of Chestnut Hill*

By Susana Lannik



My neighbors and I know Mark Schuster as a father, husband, friend, philanthropist and road monitor. The “road monitor” moniker is somewhat unfortunate, as it sounds like something out of old Soviet Russia or the vigilante Wild West, but it is really an unpaid job that is passed like an inheritance from one neighbor to another.

The post requires a diplomat’s skill in dealing with every neighbor on a variety of concerns: maintenance costs, speed bumps, sign aesthetics, drainage issues and snow removal. When asked why he has held the job for seven years, Mark said, “I’ve been doing it ever since [the last monitor left], which means it is a job no one wants.”

Last winter, Mark was our special neighborhood hero, and his efforts inspired me to crown him as the “Mayor of Chestnut Hill.” Flying missives in the form of emails came from him as the snow continued to fall week after week. He managed to enlist our plowing contractor to do work practically around-the-clock so that our road was always clear, unlike many other neighborhoods.

When the snow finally melted it was apparent that the road damage was extensive and that we would have to do something about it. Mark’s new project was to ensure that each and every neighbor bought into the reconstruction of our road. When asked how he did this, he modestly stated, “Everyone has been cooperative and timely. Things happen when people are agreeable, open minded and want it to happen.” He also revealed his business acumen when he said, “They see it as smart business; the value of their homes will be greater, as infrastructure enhances the value.”

Mark was kind enough to visit with me to share some of his thoughts on his Chestnut Hill experience and his life that goes beyond the road monitor role.

“I grew up in Chestnut Hill,” he reported. “For a while, I lived in New York City, but I moved back to Massachusetts in 1983, traveling back after that to New York City. My wife, Audrey, and I moved to our present home following a time in Brookline. The

house we bought here was terrific and perfect for our needs. It was sold in construction when the former owner’s wife decided that she wanted to return to the west coast.”

A house needing love, care and improvements would challenge many, but not Mark. Apparently, he dove right in! At the time, he and Audrey had two young children and one infant. Mark is principal and CEO of Wingate and Associates, a company specializing in the acquisition and moderate to full rehabilitation of large apartment complexes all over the country. Wingate Companies also has a management group that manages 150,000 units along the East Coast, Midwest and Texas. He has built completely new buildings as well. So the house was a personal and special project.

I have known Audrey through her charitable endeavors, but I had no idea that Mark has charitable interests of his own. I was amazed at what I read from a quick search on Google.

One of his initiatives is P.E.A.C.E, which grew out of “wanting to give back to communities we are in,” said Mark. Founded in 1995, P.E.A.C.E. is an acronym for Positive Education Always Creates Elevation, and is a full-service organization that promotes technical, social and vocational skills. “I wanted to give the kids in [Wingate’s] apartments a better education,” he explained. The first P.E.A.C.E. program was created in Atlanta; there is now one in Boston as well.

In 1977, Mark’s brother needed a kidney transplant. Mark not only donated a kidney, but also co-founded the Schuster Transplant Center at Brigham and Women’s Hospital. The goal of the center is to make every transplant a success that lasts a lifetime.

Mark says, “The idea is to make the transplant process easier for families and transplant recipients—more efficient and pleasant.” The program enables all of the professionals involved in a transplant to meet with the patient in one area, instead of having the patient move from office to office within the hospital complex.

“My brother still has his kidney,” he said. “Just to see Scott on the second day go from green to rosy-cheeked was my motivation in creating this program.”

There is more. Like many of us, Mark is sometimes conscious of roads not taken. “I’d love to teach history,” he revealed. “It demonstrates how fundamental forces are consistently major factors in the outcome of important events.” But as far as what he wants for himself now, Mark, a man who appears to have everything, replied, “I have no answer except that it would be nice to see world peace.”