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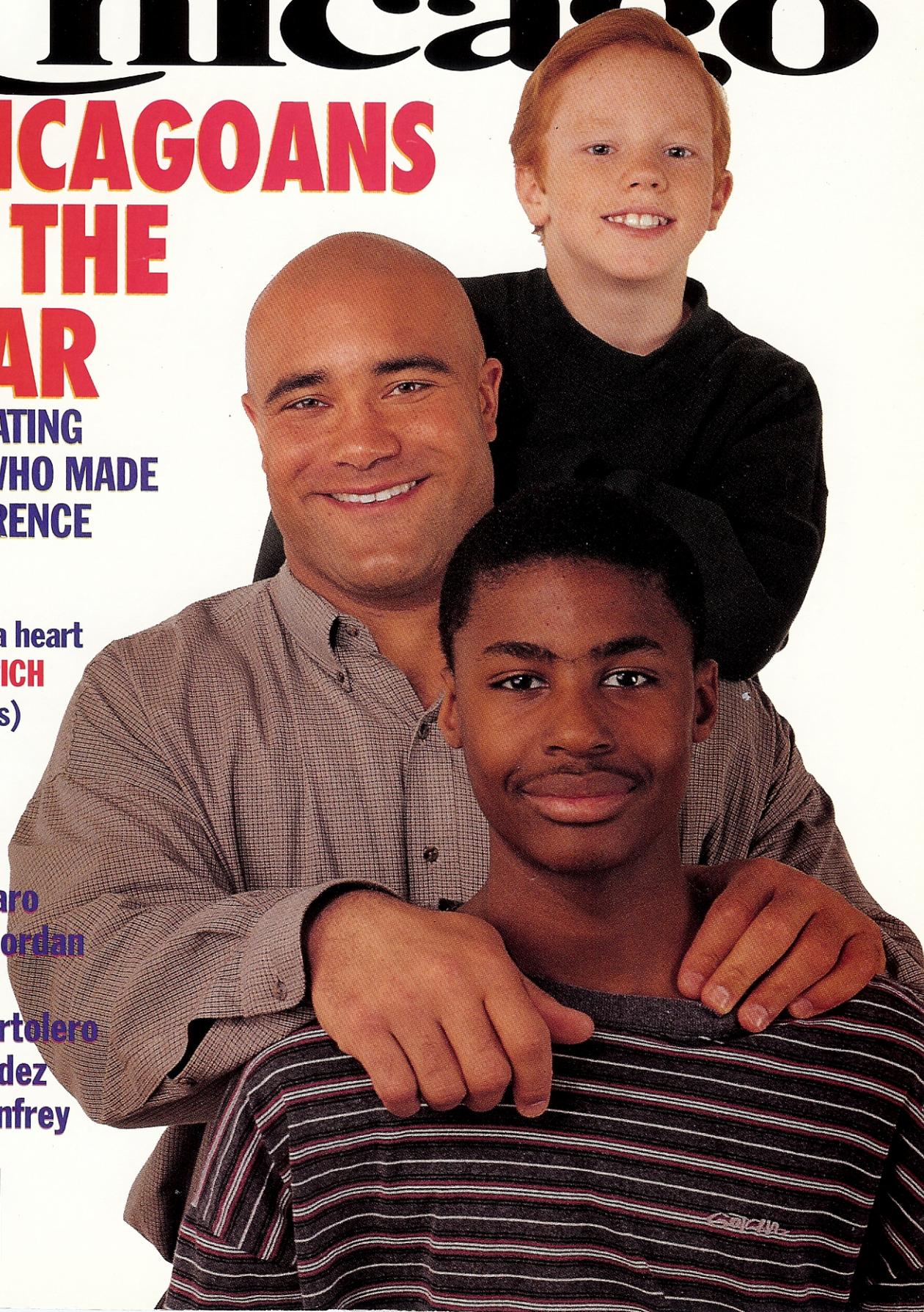
CHICAGOANS OF THE YEAR

**CELEBRATING
SEVEN WHO MADE
A DIFFERENCE
IN 1994**

Bear with a heart
CHRIS ZORICH
(and friends)

Inside:

**Jim Capraro
Timothy Jordan
Liz Phair
Carlos Tortolero
Helen Valdez
Oprah Winfrey**



CHICAGOANS OF THE YEAR

Our all-star team
of special people
whose good works
and great ideas
enriched the city
in 1994

Several residents and visitors mostly hustled past what was then a rather rundown boat house on 19th Street, thinking the place was closed. Visit this West Side neighborhood — today, though, and you are likely to run into a famous artist or a swarm of school kids leaving the building, which has been transformed into what many consider the country's foremost center of Mexican culture and art. Many people deserve credit for the museum, but two in particular Carlos Tortolero and Helen Valdez - really made it happen.

Chicago has always been home to an amazing number of people like Tortolero and Valdez - people who refused to accept the way things were and did something to make a difference. Jane Addams, who turned away from a life of ease in order to help immigrants and the poor in Chicago, is perhaps the most widely renowned; but Harriet Monroe exhibited the same qualities when she founded Poetry magazine in 1912, forever changing the world of poetry and repositioning Chicago as a major literary force; and George Cole, a businessman, played a similar role when he agreed to head the Municipal Voters League and lead the fight against City Council corruption in 1896, helping to oust 25 corrupt aldermen.

We wanted a way to recognize the incredible work done in the past year by people of vision and heart, people who have earned the distinction Chicagoans of the Year. Finding them presented quite a task. We talked to dozens of community leaders and people active in a number of different fields. We also had help from our readers, nearly 100 of whom responded to our invitation and wrote in with recommendations. Then the editors here at *Chicago* met, argued, winnowed the list down, went out and researched some more, and finally came up with the seven finalists.

Some of our selections have familiar faces - a talk-show host and a football star who are committed to helping the less fortunate, and a singer who dared to say what many only thought. Others are not so widely known - in addition to Valdez and Tortolero, there is a community organizer who is rewriting the book on neighborhood revitalization and a teenage boy who decided he needed to be both seen and heard. But famous or obscure, each has a compelling story to tell.

And because the city is constantly changing, this is just the first installment of what we plan to make an annual feature - giving us a welcome opportunity to search out just a few of the people who've taken it upon themselves to make the city a better place.

• Dale Eastman

Jim Capraro
Timothy Jordan
Liz Phair
Carlos Tortolero
Helen Valdez
Oprah Winfrey
Chiris Zorich

JIM CAPRARO

He's a nonprofit developer who saw the profit in staying put and making his community work

by Dale Eastman

Jim Capraro loves to drive visitors up and down Western Avenue, around the intersection of 63rd Street, and watch them get overwhelmed. “People come from all over to see what’s going on, but [then] they come to us and say, ‘What’s so special? It looks normal to us.’ We say, ‘Thanks; normal is good.’ ”

What people fail to understand when wandering through Capraro’s Chicago Lawn neighborhood, says the 44-year-old executive director of the Greater Southwest Development Corporation, is that much of the commercial development lining the street — the 47,500-square-foot Jewel, the First Chicago bank branch, the fast-food stores, the laundromats, and the video shops — is all relatively new. And it exists, in large part, because of Capraro and Greater Southwest, which he founded in 1977.

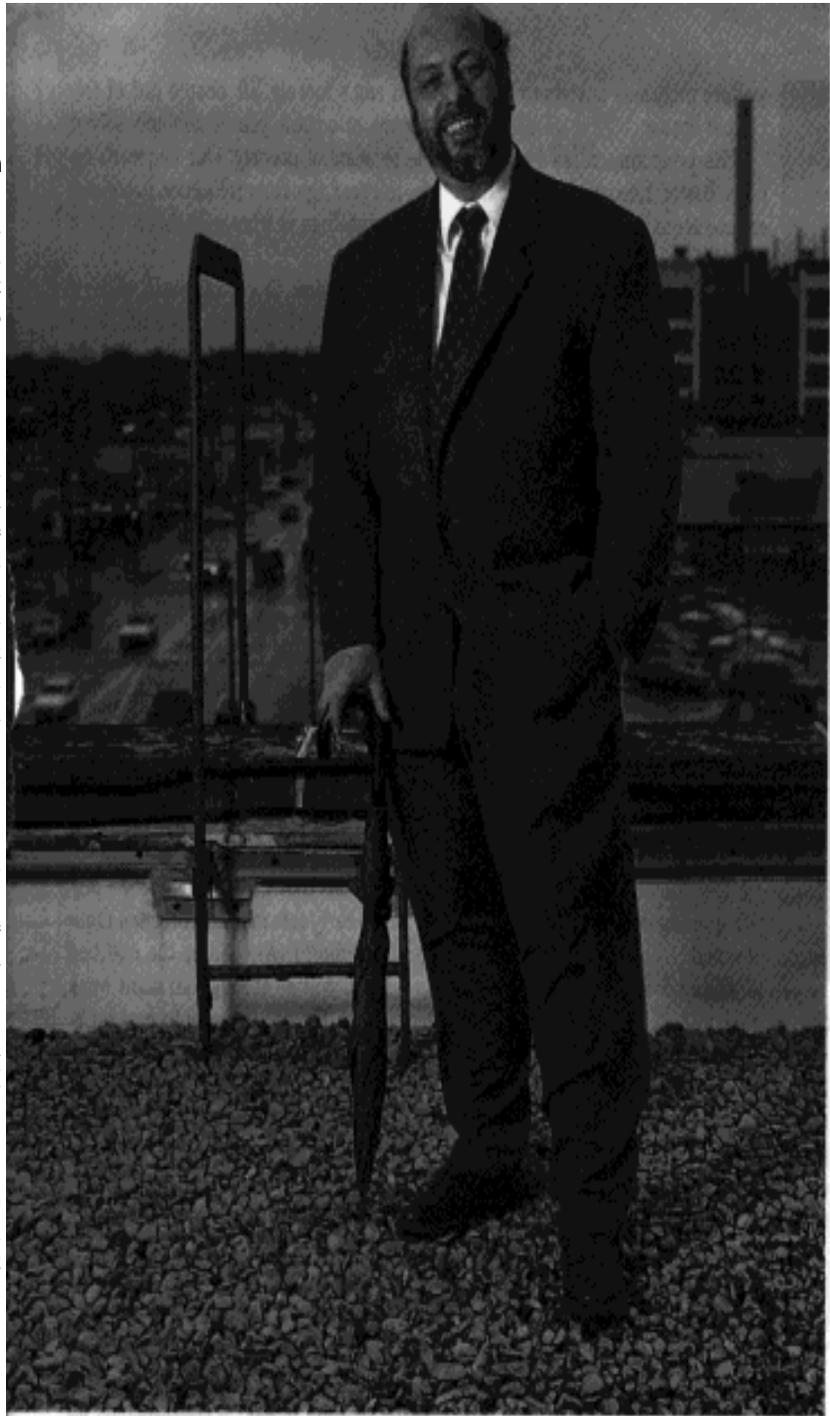
“Jim’s visionary attributes have gotten the neighborhood where it is,” says Jon Borman, general manager of Nabisco, which for a time thought about closing down its Chicago Lawn bakery — the world’s largest.

“After ten minutes into my first ride [around the community with Jim],” recalls Borman, “I was asking *him* to sign *me up* for something. That’s how infectious he is.”

Instead, Borman signed up Capraro to help navigate Nabisco’s tax-incentive proposal through governmental waters — a plan that was ultimately approved, keeping Nabisco’s 2,200 jobs in town.

“I guess you could call him the patron saint of urban renewal,” says John Spencer, general manager of the local Sears store, which had also given thought in the late seventies to pulling out of the neighborhood until Capraro’s group stepped in with its initial plans to revitalize the community.

It’s a role any smart community developer would play, but, as in most things, Capraro gave it his special spin. Not only did he help Nabisco create a tax arrangement beneficial to both the company and the city; he also got local businesses to identify ways they and Nabisco could work together to bring everyone’s business costs down. During meetings with business leaders, Capraro also identified other neighborhood companies primed to pull out of the city — including Kraft’s KoolAid plant — and helped persuade them to stay put as well. The city was so impressed with Capraro’s work, it designated part of Chicago Lawn as one of six model industrial corridors.



The selection was welcome validation for Capraro, a man who still lives in the same community where he was born, schooled, and raised, and which he is now working to save. Chicago Lawn has also been home to Capraro's parents and grandparents, who immigrated to the city from Italy. But that was back in the days when the area was made up mostly of white, largely Roman Catholic residents; before the creeping fear that allowing blacks and Latinos to move in would ultimately devalue property. Before buildings started to be abandoned. And, of course, before someone threw a brick at Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr., during an open-housing march.

The 1966 Marquette Park incident, which Capraro witnessed when he was just 16, has haunted the Chicago Lawn area where the park is located. It also goaded Capraro to action. He spent years of training to become a community organizer, followed by decades of proving that the disintegration of a community generally has nothing to do with race and everything to do with economics. And if approached from a broad-based business perspective, he says, nearly every community can foster a diverse ethnic mix while still maintaining a strong economic base. As proof, he points to Chicago Lawn's increasingly balanced racial makeup, which in 1990 included 43 percent whites, 28 percent Hispanics, and 26 percent African Americans — an evolution that's taken place alongside the community's improving business climate.

"Jim and his organization are really in the vanguard in terms of the most effective approach to community development," says Chicago commissioner of planning and development Valerie Jarrett. "What he believes is that you have to look at a community comprehensively. Many community development corporations focus on low- to moderate-income housing. That's an important ingredient, but unless you're also addressing jobs and health care and human services, I think you're not going to really revitalize the community in a healthy way."

Keeping up with all that activity can be dizzying, leading one colleague to admit that "[Capraro's] so darn peppy sometimes, it's annoying," while another worries that, especially given the part time consulting work other communities are now asking him to do, Capraro may be spreading himself too thin. Even Capraro acknowledges the overwhelming pace at which he sometimes moves, but adds: "My background is organizing, so I kind of feel that if we're not creating a new organization every year, we're just not doing [the job]."

His current focus is on building housing for seniors in the community, so rising costs won't push them out. In what Jarrett calls a tremendous show of confidence in Capraro, the city has agreed to use its quick-take powers to speed the land acquisition process - moving in quickly to buy a house or business for fair-market value -something rarely, if ever, used in the private sector, but which should cut Capraro's building time in half.

"I think what Jim has done very well is think as an entrepreneur," says Jack Pettigrew, an urban planner working on the model industrial corridor plan. "He's been out there on the cutting edge, taking community development into areas where it hasn't traditionally gone." As a result, he says, "a lot of other groups are attempting to do the same."