

2016 IACT Annual Awards:
Ivan H. Brinegar Municipal Management

**Burns Harbor and beyond positively impacted
through Burton's creative leadership,
passionate mentoring and humble service**

As a young girl, Kim Burton fondly remembers spending her summers with sister and friends at Burns Harbor's Lakeland Park. There, she spent most sunny days on the playground, attending a children's sewing class or playing ping pong in the game room. With a smile, she recalls the fun she had swimming out to the center of the lake and jumping off the dock with the other kids.



In those days, Kim never would have dreamed she would someday lead the park and its recreational facilities for more than 20 years of service. She never would have imagined she would devote herself to expanding the numerous family-friendly programs and outdoor events. Yet today, Kim is respected in Burns Harbor as a humble leader, passionate community volunteer and positive role model by town officials and residents alike.

Unofficially, Kim first became involved with the Burns Harbor Park Department in the early 1990s when she lived in town with her husband, conveniently across the street from Lakeland Park. Continuing the tradition from her childhood, she often exercised and walked at the park with her then-infant son. Already active in her community, Kim was a member of the social Westport Community Club and volunteered in the area for five years before being named as the parks Assistant Director in 1996. Two years later, the Park Board named Kim the director.

While there were many successful operations and programs already in place when she began her role, Kim hoped to expand its services to be all-inclusive for not just children, but all ages. In addition, Kim set a personal goal towards community outreach to inform both the 1,400 residents and regional community members of the small town's big offerings.

Over the next two decades, the Park Department grew thanks to Kim's leadership:

- Further developed Day Camp from six children to between 50 – 60 children attending the three one-week, half-day summer sessions and yearly sold-out afternoon Art Camp
- Expanded from just two to now five locations at Lakeland Park, Bolinger Park, Corlin's Landing, Shadyside Park and Trail Creek
- Improved public amenities at Lakeland Park including newly refurbished baseball/softball field, basketball court, additional playground equipment, gazebo to host weddings and entertainment, five rental shelters and arts building as well as at Bolinger Park with a basketball half court scheduled for construction next year
- Lengthy list of programs and events such as Lego Club, Movie Night, Coffee/Cupcake & Canvas, ice cream socials, senior bingo, crochet and hunter's education classes and more
- Increased from eight – 10 to 15 – 20 part-time employees
- Launched park-specific Facebook page in 2010 with currently 821 Likes to inform and engage public socially

“I enjoy the impact that you can have on the community,” Kim said. “These days so much time is spent with technology. If we can get everyone outside to participate in our programs and do something physical and love it — that makes it all worth it.”

Instrumental to the Park Department’s growth was formulating consistent and strategic fundraising opportunities nearly three years ago. Led by Kim’s creative efforts, three major wellness events are now aimed at generating funds for future programs and facility improvements: Footloose 5K, Pumpkin Fest and 5K Dash as well as Santa Dash. The majority of all programs and events, besides fundraising efforts, are offered at no cost to participants.

Most notably, the Footloose 5K has quickly become Burns Harbor’s staple event of the summer season. This family-friendly, 1980s-inspired event includes a 5K run/walk and kids fun run, live entertainment, food and refreshments, party tent, fireworks and so much more. Named the biggest first-time event by local media, Footloose brought together 400 to 500 attendees in its first year, despite inclement weather. This year’s upcoming third annual event is expected to gather a crowd of more than 1,000 from Porter and Lake counties as well as from throughout the Chicagoland region.

Clerk-Treasurer Jane Jordan has worked with Kim for more than 12 years and sees first-hand the numerous hours she dedicates to the park and community events. “Kim continues to find innovative ways of supporting programs and projects for the Park Department. She develops and implants interesting programs and activities that are attended by visitors from other states as well as Burns Harbor and Northwest Indiana residents,” Jordan said.

Kim’s innovation and commitment to serving the entire community was showcased this past spring during the Easter Egg Hunt and first-ever Spectacular Egg Hunt for children with special needs. With the help of the Kidworks Developmental Intervention Center, she designed a quiet egg hunt for children with Autism spectrum disorders or children with sensory processing issues, and a hunt for children who are visually impaired. In addition, a magnetic hunt for children using wheelchairs or children with mobility issues took place. Kim said months before the event she received a call from a parent inquiring if her child with special needs could attend. She encouraged their attendance and then began researching to add to the event.

This spring, Kim said, “I wanted to do something extra to serve all children in the community, but we’ve found the desire for an event designed specifically for children with special needs is far-reaching as 48 children signed up to attend, mostly from throughout Porter and Lake counties.”

More than 400 children and their families attended March 12 at Lakeland Park with several children participating in an egg hunt for the first-time ever. One of these children, 6-year-old Valparaiso resident Reuben Martinez could barely contain his excitement as he squealed with delight each time he located an egg. “This is the best thing in the world,” said Reuben’s mother, Kelly Martinez, at the event. “He liked it and his sisters liked helping him too. I hope other towns start looking to Burns Harbor and what the town did and follow suit.”

Kim does not limit her role as director to simply managing events and programs, supervising staff and volunteers, maintaining the parks and recreational facilities or coordinating rental opportunities. Instead her leadership style is a bit more hands-on. “I like to work alongside other employees so they know I’m their supervisor, but they don’t see me as this authoritative figure,” she said. “I like to get my hands dirty too. From unloading boxes from the attic to mowing the grass — I would never ask an employee to do something that I couldn’t do myself.”

Former Park Board member and active volunteer, Toni Biancardi brought her kids to Day Camp when they were young through Kim's suggestion. "Kim makes everyone feel welcome and valued for their participation or contribution to the Park Department through its many programs, activities and events," Biancardi, a current councilwoman, said. "Her energy and positivity are both inspiring and contagious."

Throughout the years, Kim remains dedicated in good and bad times. Due to the difficulties of the Great Recession as well as Burns Harbor's largest taxpayer and once America's second largest steel producer filing bankruptcy in 2001, the town experienced an 80% loss of annual revenue generated through taxes. The unprecedented hit ushered in massive cuts in personnel and benefits while the town struggled to survive. Kim forged ahead with a minimal budget for several years, volunteering the majority of her hours to maintain park services.

Retired long-time Park Board member Dawn Ruge said, "Kim has always been dedicated to the park and the youth in the community. She has worked for little or no wages at times, but is willing to do whatever needs to be done to keep the park going. She's always agreeable and positive, never complaining or being critical of people."

Outside her official duties, Kim has worked as a bus driver for the Duneland School Corporation for 17 years. Viewed as a veteran by her peers, Kim plans on jumpstarting a mentoring program for new bus drivers at the start of the upcoming school year. In 2005, she created a transitional program for preschoolers to tour the bus barn and ride a bus before kindergarten.

Kim has also volunteered on the Town Picnic planning committee since 1998, helping to continue the Burns Harbor summer long-time tradition. Kim has been a member of the Duneland Exchange Club for 15 years and has volunteered as a House Captain for Rebuilding Together Duneland for the past five years. Additionally, she has actively helped raise funds for the local American Cancer Society chapter.

Perhaps Kim's most proudest accomplishment is coming full circle from her childhood, watching other kid's play at Lakeland Park as she did long ago. From the morning bus rides to time spent together at Day Camp, to participating in the park's programs and beyond — for many of the town's children, Kim has watched them grow up, literally, right in front of her eyes. A few regulars have even begun working for the park as teenagers and continued doing so throughout college. In fact, Kim is so recognized as a role model, many kids are often heard asking their parents to go to the park, which they affectionately refer to as "Kim's house" or "Kim's park."

"I do what I do just to help people. Mentoring and seeing the town's children grow up is so rewarding," Kim said, becoming emotional. "Getting the kids involved and giving them good choices to guide them — if the park as a whole can help anyone, not just kids but even the community, towards a better path in life then it's good."

Marcus Rogala — councilman, Footloose 5K event coordinator and former Park Board president — has worked with Kim for the past five years. He noted the respect Kim receives from all ages. "I've seen first-hand how children are drawn to her. It is almost like they are her own," he said. "She is the silent mother of Burns Harbor and loves this community like it is her own."

Kim credits the Park Board, Park Department employees, countless volunteers, Town Council as well as other town leadership, employees and residents for helping her succeed.

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When Kim is not watching over the community's children, this 43-year-old is a mother to Corey, 20, Riley, 13, and Anna, 9, with her husband of 22 years, Rick.



Kim's tireless efforts have helped put Lakeland Park on the map. Viewed as a well-kept secret for years, Lakeland Park and its seven-acre man-made Harbor Lake is tucked away behind the Interstate 94 interchange. Each year, the park's attendance grows through community outreach and popularity of programs and events.



Thanks to Kim's commitment and creativity, Burns Harbor offered one of the area's only public Easter egg hunts for all children, including those with special needs, this spring.



Hundreds of participants take off at last year's Footloose 5K. The popularity of Park Department events, led by Kim's leadership, has helped build Burns Harbor's identity throughout the region.