Focus on family
Meet Kiwanis International President Paul Palazzolo
It’s only natural Paul Palazzolo is Kiwanis International’s new president. He’s a Kiwanis-raised leader after all.

Story and photography by Jack Brockley
School’s out for the day, and everyone’s gone home. Everyone except a freshman. He scratches his thick, wavy dark hair and stares once again down an empty Springfield, Illinois, street. His brother Dominic’s car is nowhere in sight. Behind him, a door opens. It’s Father Gerald Leahy, likely bearing an alibi from the tardy sibling.

A Bob Hope and Three Stooges fan, Palazzolo peppers his speeches with jokes and puns.

HOMETOWN HERO. Occasionally, Palazzolo has to explain that Springfield is the capital of the State of Illinois and home of U.S. President Abraham Lincoln — not the home of Homer, Marge, Bart, Lisa and Maggie Simpson.
The priest reports that Dominic will be a few minutes late. While they wait, they talk and the conversation turns to the virtues of service. Finally, Dominic pulls up to the curb, but rather than bidding the expected good-bye, Father Leahy says, “I’ll see you tomorrow evening.”

It sounds more like a reminder than an invitation.

“What’s tomorrow?” the freshman asks.

“Key Club,” the priest answers. “I’ll find you a ride.”

Every year, Kiwanis trains more than 300,000 youth to be servant leaders. These K-Kids, Builders, Key Club and CKI members grow up to become parents, educators, ministers, business tycoons, mayors, heads of state, professional athletes and celebrities. The freshman who, one autumn afternoon 29 years ago, stood waiting for his brother outside Springfield, Illinois’ Griffin High School has grown up to lead the organization that trained him to be a leader. On October 1, 2009, former Key Club leader Paul Palazzolo became Kiwanis International president.

“I owe a lot to Kiwanis,” Palazzolo says. “It has introduced me to a lot of people who have influenced my life. Now I feel it’s my turn and my obligation to pass what I’ve learned to future generations of leaders.”

Key Club changed his life. Gone were the days he and neighbor kids jumped their bicycles over makeshift ramps in empty lots. Now he was raking senior citizens’ yards and selling light bulbs to raise money for good causes. Every year, Kiwanians were opening doors of opportunity.

Here’s Paul

**Born:** 1966

**Parents:** Paul and Angeline.
Both U.S.-born Italians. His father owned and operated Coutrakon’s, a popular 1950s teen hangout.

**Wife:** Suanne. A third-generation mortician.

**Education:** University of Illinois-Champaign, finance

**Career:** Auditor, Sangamon County, Illinois. Licensed real estate broker.

**Children:** Maria (12) and Anthony (8).

**KIWANIS-FAMILY LIFE**

**Key Club:** Griffin High School (1980–84)

**Kiwanis:** Springfield-Downtown, Illinois, club (1984 to present)

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**HE’S MY BROTHER.**
Fifteen years older, Dominic already had begun his career as a pharmacist when Paul entered high school.

**HITCHIN’ A RIDE.** Father Leahy realized freshmen would have difficulty attending the Key Club’s evening meetings. So he recruited junior and senior members who had drivers’ licenses to transport underclassmen to and from meetings and activities. “He thought of every angle to get you involved,” Palazzolo says.

**A CULTURE OF MENTORING.**
In the 1980s, Illinois-Eastern Iowa District Key Club Administrator Jerry McConnell mentored Key Club District Governor Paul Palazzolo.
In the 1990s, Kiwanis Advisor Palazzolo mentored Key Club member Brian Davis.
In the 2000s, Kiwanis Advisor Davis is mentoring Chatham, Illinois, High School Key Clubbers.

As 1983–84 Key Club governor of the Illinois-Eastern Iowa District, Palazzolo attended the then-annual leadership conference at Freedoms Foundation in Valley Forge, Pennsylvania.
They encouraged him to run for Key Club lieutenant governor. He did and made it. They encouraged him to run for Key Club district governor. He did and won again. When his high school and Key Club days were over, they invited him to join Kiwanis. He did, and they welcomed him as a seasoned member.

“Right away,” Palazzolo says, “they asked me to chair the food drive, which my club runs in coordination with Springfield’s Christmas parade.”

Soon, the club asked him to serve as bulletin editor. And Key Club advisor. And club secretary, after which he achieved distinguished status as both a club president and lieutenant governor.

His quick rise through the Kiwanis ranks caught the eye of another pioneer leader.

In 1990, Park Forest, Illinois, Kiwanian Jim Reed was set to become the first African-American to serve as governor of the Illinois-Eastern Iowa District. He was looking for someone to serve with him as district secretary, and Palazzolo had all the credentials. There was one problem: He was young. Real young.

“Jim took a lot of heat for choosing me as district secretary,” Palazzolo recalls. “Some people were saying I was too young. It wasn’t my time. But Jim said, ‘Nope. That’s the guy I want.’”

“He got his way, and I worked my tail off for Jim that year.”

It showed, because the district earned Kiwanis International’s Administrative Excellence Award that year.

Palazzolo continued to follow the natural trail of leadership to district governor, where he earned distinguished status.

“I was meeting people from all

One of Palazzolo’s heroes is a fellow Springfield politician, Abraham Lincoln, whose face adorns the Sangamon County flag in Palazzolo’s downtown Springfield office.

**2009–10 GOALS**

**Grow to serve**

The primary reason to increase membership, says Paul Palazzolo, is to increase Kiwanis’ impact in the lives of children, our communities and the world. That’s why he summarizes the organization’s 2009–10 goals in three words: “Growth for service.”

**Here’s how he hopes Kiwanis will grow for service in the coming year:**

- Through building and mentoring 500 new clubs worldwide
- Through helping club leaders provide outstanding member experiences
- Through helping clubs fulfill their commitments of Kiwanis-family sponsorship

You can help Kiwanis grow for service. Visit www.kiwanismagazine.org for helpful resources.
around the world and going to Kiwanis International conventions,” he says. “What an experience that was for someone who hadn’t yet turned 30.”

The experience convinced him to seek election in 2004 as a Kiwanis International Trustee.

Along the way, Palazzolo made sure Kiwanis did not interfere with the other priorities in his life. It’s a pledge he’s committed to continue through his term as Kiwanis International president.

Through careful scheduling of his Kiwanis responsibilities, he plans to be home to play Monopoly with his family, cheer for Maria at basketball games and for Anthony at baseball games or cover the home front when his wife, Suanne, is called in to work at her family’s funeral home.

Monday through Friday, 8:30 a.m. to 5 p.m., he’ll be at the Sangamon County Building in his role as county auditor.

“We all have busy lives,” Palazzolo says. “But what we do in Kiwanis—the lives we are changing—is so important. We need to take the time to make a difference.”

Father Leahy made time to make a difference in a high school freshman 29 years ago. Jim Reed made time to make a difference in an ambitious young leader 19 years ago.

“We Kiwanians can contribute to the development of young leaders, burn into their hearts a passion for service, put them on the path of Kiwanis membership and leave a legacy of leadership that lives well beyond us,” Palazzolo says. “We just need to make time.”
If you’re reading this article, thank you. Perusing your Kiwanis magazine is an indication of an admirable level of commitment to the organization. It’s my hope that, during the 2009–10 year, you’ll share that commitment with current and prospective members. How can you share your commitment? 

**Focus on service.** Set an example by contributing time toward a current project’s success. Has your club actively conducted a service project to involve as many members as possible within the past seven weeks? If not, why not? Regarding a new project, suggest that your club address a new community need. Sharing your commitment in this way could result in your club making new strides in service.

**Motivate.** Encourage fellow Kiwanians to share their commitment by inviting new members into the club. Remind them that someone once shared Kiwanis with them. Return that kindness by sponsoring a new member into your club in 2009. Ensure that new members receive the proper orientation and a meaningful induction. Get them involved and active. Build their commitment so they’ll share Kiwanis too!

Thanks for your time and commitment. Your involvement is important, but your commitment is even more important to the children and to the communities served by your Kiwanis club. Share your commitment!

**What’s your commitment? Share it with me at president@kiwanis.org.**