By Meaghan Casey

What do Tootsie Rolls have to do with Cardinal Cushing Centers’ culinary center and its soon-to-open MarketPlace? Quite a lot, actually.

Cushing has been the biggest benefactor of the Massachusetts State Council of the Knights of Columbus and its annual Tootsie Roll Drive. The fundraiser, more formally known as the Campaign for People with Intellectual Disabilities, is a popular and successful one. Knights are positioned outside of grocery stores holding cans and each donor is offered a piece of candy, most commonly a Tootsie Roll.

State Deputy Paul Flanagan estimates the Massachusetts State Council raises between $200,000 and $300,000 annually through the drive, and 100 percent of the funds go toward providing more resources for people with intellectual and physical disabilities to live happy lives.

The Knights’ support of Cushing dates back to the late 1970s when the organization donated $300,000 for Cushing to open its culinary arts center. Annually, the State Council supports Cushing’s golf tournament and Springtime fundraiser — even volunteering some of its officers as models. The organization has also given substantial donations to renovate the chapel in the Kennedy Building and kitchens in students’ homes. And more recently, the Knights gave $150,000 toward the MarketPlace.

“I get emotional sometimes seeing these wonderful children having such great lives. It’s what Cardinal Cushing imagined.”

— PAUL FLANAGAN

Michelle Markowitz, Cardinal Cushing’s interim president and CEO, with Sister Joanne Schatzlein, OSF, Director of Corporate Ministries for the Sisters of St. Francis of Assisi.

Cushing beat is in good hands

Markowitz settles into role of president, CEO

By Paul Halloran

Had her career path taken a different turn, Michelle Markowitz might be wearing a badge and keeping one of the local communities safe. But, since everything happens for a reason, she continues to keep watch over the Cushing community, now in the role of interim president and chief executive officer.

“About 15 years ago, I was going to become a police officer. I come from a family with deep roots in law enforcement,” said Markowitz, whose father is a clerk magistrate, brother a state trooper and several uncles local police officers. “I went through the Municipal Police training course.”

By that point, she had been working at Cardinal Cushing Centers in Hanover for about seven years, though her affiliation started when she volunteered at St. Coletta Day School in Braintree as a student at Archbishop Williams High School next door. She worked at Cushing throughout her college years at Bridgewater State University and came on board full-time in 1998.

Markowitz has held a variety of roles, working in the classroom, the residential program, as vice president of admissions, and chief operating officer, prior to being named interim president and CEO in January.

For Markowitz, it has been a seamless transition to the top position in the organization, at least until
We will get through this with your help

As you will read in this edition of the Cardinal Cushing Connector, my experience with this wonderful organization dates back to my high school days, when I volunteered at the St. Coletta site in Braintree. Since then I have held several positions, and I am humbled and honored to serve as interim president and CEO.

While the prospect of taking over was somewhat daunting, as chief operating officer I had been involved in all aspects of the operation, so I was confident as I took on the added responsibility.

Who knew a pandemic was coming. We have all had to deal with unimaginable challenges during the COVID-19 health crisis. I could not be prouder of the job our staff has done under very difficult circumstances. We adjusted to the closure of our day programs for students and adults, while maintaining our residential program. We continue to provide as much support as necessary for every person and family we serve.

Never has it been clearer that working collaboratively is critical, especially in a time of crisis. The Cushing staff has embraced the challenges presented by this unprecedented situation, always acting in the best interest of those we serve, despite dealing with their own personal trials and tribulations.

Cushing will survive, and thrive, but we could really use some help at this time. We have established a new fundraising initiative — the Cushing Fund. Between having to cancel Springtime and the uncertainty surrounding funding for services while some programs are shut down, it is vitally important that we raise funds to ensure that we not only continue to operate now, but also fully recover when we make it through this crisis. We appreciate your support always, but especially now.

I am very pleased that we are publishing this edition of the Cardinal Cushing Connector at this time. It is important to highlight the great people and programs that make Cushing the special organization it is.

Not even a pandemic can change that.

Michelle Markowitz is interim president and CEO of Cardinal Cushing Centers.

Please support the Cushing Fund

While we are all navigating uncertain times, one thing we want to be certain of at Cardinal Cushing Centers is the health, safety, and well-being of our community. As such, we made the decision to cancel our Springtime gala this year. We plan to honor Dolly Di Pesa and The Raymond Family in 2021.

As closures extend with the government’s recommendations, funds we typically receive for our services may be delayed. Uncertainty around whether we will receive funds for the days we have had to close or adjust our programs looms. We are working diligently to remain open for our residents. But we can’t do it alone. We need your support.

To that end, we have created The Cushing Fund to keep Cushing operational now and to help us fully recover from these challenging times. Instead of the table you might have purchased or the auction item you might have bid on at Springtime, we hope you will consider supporting The Cushing Fund. You can donate online at cushingcenters.org/the-cushing-fund or by sending a gift in the enclosed envelope. Your donation will truly make an impact.

The Coronavirus Aid, Relief and Economic Security (CARES) Act also removes the existing 60 percent adjusted gross income (AGI) deduction limitation for those who do itemize, thereby allowing a deduction of up to 100 percent of AGI for qualified contributions made in 2020. Thank you for your consideration.

Please visit cushingcenters.org/the-cushing-fund/

Knights of Columbus answer call for Cushing

far, Cushing has received the biggest amount we’ve given to any organization. They have such a great vision over there and their needs have been greater with expansion and renovation projects over the years. We’ve been fortunate to have been in the position to help fulfill some of that.”

Outside of Cushing, the Knights have given to organizations such as the Seven Hills Foundation, Friendship Home and more.

Flanagan, who joined the Knights of Columbus 16 years ago, follows his father and grandfather in the role of state deputy — the highest position within the organization.

“I’m the first third-generation with that title in the whole order,” said Flanagan. “That’s pretty special.”

What has also been special has been getting to know the staff, students and residents at Cushing over the years.

“We usually go over for dinner a couple times a year and we participate in some of the events,” said Flanagan. “I love seeing the kids grow up and the community coming together in support. I get emotional sometimes seeing these wonderful children having such great lives. It’s what Cardinal Cushing imagined.”

From left, Francis Galvin, Knights of Columbus District Deputy; Paul O’Sullivan, past State Deputy; Jansi Chandler, Cushing Vice President of Development; Bass Café employee Selena Waitt; Robert Schwarz, State Advocate; and Russell Steinbach, Executive Secretary.
By Meaghan Casey

If there’s a face of Springtime, it has been that of Jim Fagan. Fagan, a lifelong South Shore resident, has volunteered to serve as the auctioneer of Cushing’s annual fundraising gala for more than a decade. For the past three years, he has also modeled. Though this year’s event is tabled until 2021, Fagan is looking forward to his eventual return to the catwalk. “I’ve always enjoyed being with the students,” he said.

Fagan was first introduced to Cushing by his parents, Betty and Jim, who were active volunteers and avid fundraisers for the organization in the 1960s. The Fagans lived in Pembroke, just about five miles from the school. His brothers, Tom and Rick, were both summer counselors at Cushing. Fagan volunteered for a few car washes and gym days, and he has a vivid memory of attending a Requiem Mass for Richard Cardinal Cushing a month after his passing. “I had every intention of standing in the back and tiptoeing out at the end, but the monsignor caught me and invited me to the breakfast,” said Fagan. “I ended up sitting with [Humberto] Cardinal Medeiros. My [Sacred Heart Elementary] school principal came in and couldn’t believe it.”

For more than two decades, Fagan worked for Shields Health Care Group as a territory manager in its diagnostic imaging department. He retired five years ago, though he still consults. Fagan also emcees and raises funds for at least 20 charities, including the Boys & Girls Club of Brockton, Make-A-Wish Foundation, Quincy Rotary Club, Dana-Farber Cancer Institute, the Wounded Warrior Project, Friendship Home, New England Home for Veterans, the Leukemia and Lymphoma Society and more. “Of all the events I do, Springtime remains the most special because of Cushing’s connection with my parents,” he said.

Last year’s Springtime event, held May 30 at the Seaport Hotel, raised a record $675,000 for the organization. Fagan says he is continually amazed and impressed by the generosity of Cushing’s supporters. “When someone can give a $50,000 check, what a feeling that must be,” he said.

In 2014, Fagan was the recipient of the Richard Cardinal Cushing Award at Springtime. The award is given annually to an individual, business or organization that demonstrates humility, compassion and dedication to enhancing the lives of individuals with intellectual disabilities. “That was one of my highlights,” he said. “My mother was able to attend and she was so proud.”

Fagan is also a two-time recipient of the Edward R. Murrow award for sports broadcasting of high school football for WATD-FM radio – along with the WATD broadcast team. He has been married for the last 42 years to his wife, Janice. The couple has four children and five grandchildren, and Fagan hopes they will help to carry on his legacy. “My commitment to Cushing has been passed down and I hope to pass it down to my children and grandchildren,” he said.

He also hopes to be bringing back his six favorite words in the spring of 2021: “Let’s open the bidding at just…”

While this year’s Springtime event is canceled, Cardinal Cushing Centers has established the Cushing Fund to raise money for operating expenses during these challenging times. To donate to the Cushing Fund, visit cushingcenters.org/the-cushing-fund/

“My commitment to Cushing has been passed down and I hope to pass it down to my children and grandchildren.” — JIM FAGAN
The magic of the Arts

CUSHING CAST BRINGS ALADDIN TO LIFE

While Broadway might be shut down for the foreseeable future, the curtain didn’t close on Cardinal Cushing Centers’ production of Aladdin. More than 50 students in the Drama Club performed the show in mid-February, delighting audience members with their colorful costumes, vocals and adaptation of the classic fairy tale.

The Drama Club, which typically puts on one musical a year (last year it was The Little Mermaid), is just one of many opportunities for students to excel in the arts at Cushing. The school has a strong visual arts program, led by Randy Wiskow, as well as dance and music. New this year, Cushing offered weekly hip hop classes taught by instructors from the South Shore Conservatory. The two organizations are exploring ways to further partner next year, perhaps with a visual arts or variety show.

“Every child is an artist. The problem is how to remain an artist once he grows up.”
— Pablo Picasso

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PHOTOS: JARED CHARNEY

1. Michael John as Rajah, Princess Jasmine’s protective pet tiger.
2. From left, William Egio as Aladdin, Brian Kelly as the Genie and Andrew Bizzozero as the Magic Carpet.
5. Karl Griffin as the Sultan.
6. Megan Locke as Princess Jasmine.
7. Eddie Desiderio-Falzarano as Jafar.
8. Aiden “AJ” Johnson as a palace guard with adapted physical education instructor Katie Boutwell.
9. Zach Jonas also as Aladdin.
cancels. Dolly Di Pesa and the Raymond Family will be honored at the board about a year after Frankie started at Cushing.  

Cushing board member Jerry Vitti and his wife, Erin, appreciate the opportunities provided to their daughter, Frankie.

“Having Jo Ann as a mentor shaped my future here,” said Markowitz, who lives in her native Hull with her husband, Jeremy, and sons, Reefe (7) and Sawyer (4). “It’s always been my goal to continue my growth and maybe someday become CEO.”

The opportunity came after the resignation of John Von Ahn, and Markowitz didn’t really have time to wonder if she were ready.

“This definitely feels like my time,” she said. “The most important thing is creating a sense of trust and reassuring people that Cardinal Cushing is here, we’re doing incredible things, our programs are strong. Our services will continue to be top-notch.”

Vitti has helped to connect low-income, elderly and disabled populations with public benefit programs for more than three decades. Outside of his professional commitment, he has also made it his civic duty and is ceaseless in his advocacy on a national level. He is the coach and founder of Challenger Little League and has served on the Milton PAC Advisory Committee and the MA Health Council Board, which is the oldest public health organization in the Commonwealth. On the Cushing board, he serves as co-chair, alongside Jeanine Mount. He joined the board about a year after Frankie started at Cushing.

“Like virtually every other event scheduled to be held this spring, Cushing’s Springtime gala – and biggest fundraiser -- was canceled. Dolly Di Pesa and the Raymond Family will be honored in 2021 when, presumably, our lives will be back to normal. The cancellation, along with uncertainty surrounding funding during the closure, led to the creation of the Cushing Fund, with all donations going toward operating expenses.”

“We really need the support to sustain the organization during this pandemic,” said Markowitz. “We hope that in this environment, people are inclined to help get us through. We really can’t afford any breakdown in our funding and reimbursements.”

There is also the issue of providing security for the 650 employees who do remarkable work on behalf of the 140 students and 250 adults that Cushing serves.

“Our staff have bills to play and food to put on the table,” Markowitz said. “We need to make sure we have the revenue to continue to support them during the closures. People want to know what’s next.”

While there is plenty of anxiety to go around during the ongoing crisis, Markowitz believes that, considering her background and experience, her taking over has been well received by the Cushing staff.

“I think people are feeling a sense of stability and trust, having worked with me,” she said. “I hope they know I have the right intentions and feel like we are moving forward to do great things. I feel an incredible sense of team.”

It helps when the new coach came up through the ranks as a player.

“I know what it’s like to have to get six (residential) kids out of the house in the morning, to be stuck in the house during a snowstorm and try to find things to do,” Markowitz said. “As a leader, it’s incredibly important to have that perspective. I want to be engaged with staff at all levels, to walk side by side with them.”

She has been doing that for more than two decades and, when she was seriously considering leaving to become a police officer, the opportunity to move into the admissions department at Cushing presented itself. That was her sign to stay. Shortly thereafter, Jo Ann Simons came to Cushing as CEO and became a role model for Markowitz.

“Having Jo Ann as a mentor shaped my future here,” said Markowitz, who lives in her native Hull with her husband, Jeremy, and sons, Reefe (7) and Sawyer (4). “It’s always been my goal to continue my growth and maybe someday become CEO.”

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Marathoners take rescheduling in stride

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son is a Cushing student.
“It’s a definitely a worthwhile charity to run for,” he said. Michelle Nolan, a school counselor at a therapeutic school in Bellingham, will be running for Cushing alongside her friend Mary Keady. Both also work part-time for lululemon. While Keady has run Boston several times, this will be Nolan’s first marathon.

“I work with kids with social-emotional learning disabilities, so I cannot think of a better charity to run and raise money for,” she said. Nolan is looking forward to having more time to prepare.
“I’m excited to train in better weather,” she said. “I love being outside in the sun, and I’ll do some more scenic runs this summer. I can’t wait to finally cross that finish line and to bring in money for Cushing.”
By Meaghan Casey

When Plymouth resident Frank Walsh committed to run his first Boston Marathon for Cardinal Cushing Centers this year, he never expected he would have to wait an extra five months to cross it off his bucket list.

Walsh joins a unique group of registered runners who were mentally and physically prepared for the 124th running of the Marathon on April 20, only to have it rescheduled to Sept. 14 due to the global health crisis resulting from the COVID-19 virus.

“I was ready for it now, but I’ll just continue running here and there and pick it up again in June,” said Walsh, who completed his first marathon — the Hyannis Marathon — on Feb. 23. A Bridgewater State University student, Walsh was a standout sprinter in high school. He has always been a fast runner and has been among the top finishers in a number of 5K events. He just started to pursue distance running, finishing three half-marathons last year, and his dream has been to secure a bib for Boston.

“Since I started track back in high school, I always wanted to run Boston,” said Walsh.

Walsh’s brother, Alec, who turns 22 in July, has been a student at Cushing for about a year.

“He loves it,” said Walsh. “This is a perfect opportunity to say I ran the Marathon and to help out my brother’s school at the same time. I just think that’s really cool.”

Five others will be running for Cushing, including Canton resident Kayla Florence.

Florence ran her first marathon for Cushing in 2017 and decided to give it another go this year. Her family’s connection to Cushing runs deep, starting with her great-uncle, Lenny Florence, who was affectionately known as “Mr. Springtime” for all of his support of the organization and its primary fundraising event. Her father, Eli, serves on Cushing’s Capital Campaign and Building committees.

“Cardinal Cushing Centers has been part of my family for so long, I could never think about running for another charity,” said Florence. “I don’t even love running, so there needs to be something bigger to motivate me. That’s Cushing. I know the money’s actually going where they say it is. They’re helping so many lives all the time.”

Florence, who is earning her MBA at Babson College, says the September race will be a once-in-a-lifetime opportunity.

“Obviously it’s a little bit of a bummer that we were so close, but it’s for the greater good and safety of everyone,” she said. “It’ll be cool and really special in a way. I’m excited.”

Rockland resident Jill Elie is training for her second Boston Marathon and will be running to benefit Cushing.

“I’m a little wary about starting all over in July and running in the heat, but we’ll just have to have a different mindset in terms of hydrating,” she said.

Elie’s husband, Matt, has a cousin, Liam, who was a residential student at Cushing a few years ago.

“We’re very lucky we have four healthy kids, but we’ve seen what a great organization it is,” said Elie. “Liam benefited greatly from their programs and supports.”

This will be the 11th marathon for Joe Ohm, who lives in La Grange, Ill., a suburb of Chicago. The date change hasn’t fazed him, though it forced him to defer his entry to this year’s Chicago Marathon.

“I’m actually looking forward to it more in the fall,” said Ohm. “I’ve trained in the summers for Chicago, so this will be no different. I’m just glad they rescheduled versus cancelling it outright.”

Ohm started his marathon journey in 2012, sometimes running two a year. He has run Boston once and Chicago five times. He connected with Cushing through his friend Jonathan Siegel, whose

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