

## **Cilettis Have Been Friends to Friends for Decades**

*By Linda DuVal*

Jim and Mary Ciletti are very fittingly the honorees for the Friends of PPLD's Best Friend Award for 2024. It's only the second time the award has been given.

Mary (Francis) Ciletti was born and raised in Colorado Springs, attended Palmer High School and was a frequent patron of the Carnegie Library (later Penrose) downtown. Her mother grew up on Bijou Street, near Shooks Run, right across the street from Frank Waters' home.

Jim Ciletti was born in Pennsylvania and moved to Colorado in 1969. Diagnosed with chronic fatigue syndrome in the early 1990s, he had to give up his career as a filmmaker and decided to move from Woodland Park to a small apartment in Colorado Springs.

"My desk was the size of an aircraft carrier, so I went to Ross Auction to look for smaller one, but bought 20 boxes of wonderful books instead. A few days later, I was in Mary's bookstore selling what I didn't want. He saw a For Rent sign nearby and started Aamstar Bookshop, selling rare and collectible books. And that's how he met Mary.

Libraries played an important role in their childhoods, from elementary school to public and college ones. Jim's first job was at the library at Chicago's Loyola University when he was a student. And when Mary could not find a teaching job in 1982, she used a small inheritance from an uncle to start her own bookstore, Hooked on Books, which is still in business.

Mary joined the Friends of the Pikes Peak Library District in the mid-1980s, mainly to get access to the regular book sales. "It was a smart business decision," she admits. But she was intrigued by the Friends mission and joined the board in 1995, serving for the full 10 years. Not long before she was term-limited, she convinced Jim to join the board, too.

At her first board meeting, Mary was told "there were no candidates for the Frank Waters award, so they were going to do away with it. I'm usually pretty shy, but I spoke up. I said I know many writers who are qualified. Mary Mashburn (a board member then) said, 'Make a list,' so Jim and I made a list. "

"The next year, John Nichols came and that got us started on a new path of choosing writers who had a canon of work and set the standard for the award," Jim recalls. "We also realized we were not honoring local writers and we had significant talent in our local community, and that's when I wrote up the prospectus for the Golden Quill award."

Together, they also planned the awards dinners. And Mary, who had been handling the Betty Field youth writing contest, handed it off to Jim, who several years later handed it off to Diane Pfaltzgraff.

Jim, a published poet and then president of Poetry West, also helped start the Poet Laureate Project with the library in 2008 (and was later named by the library as the poet laureate in 2010). In addition, they have donated literally thousands of books to the Friends annual book sales "until they told us it was too much and asked us to stop!"

They often get asked: Why do you support the library when it's your competition?

“Because it’s not our competition,” Jim says. “We never compete with anyone who supports the First Amendment. We consider the library our sister-in-arms, giving everybody the right to read what they want without censorship and without persecution.”

“We are friends with all the booksellers in town and we all like each other. If you get people to read, we all benefit. So the library, of course, is No. 1.”

Jim adds: “It’s really a moral issue. Because libraries and bookstores exist for the common good.”