

A PARENT YOU KNOW

Name: Anne Steuer

Age: 42

Marital status: Divorced

Children: Meg, 17; Caroline 15

Job title: Executive Director,
Gertrude Salzer Gordon
Children's Museum of
La Crosse

Anne Steuer was born in Stamford, Conn., and has lived in five states. Taking her mom's advice to "bloom where you are planted" shaped her as a person. "It seemed like the end of the world moving from Evanston, Ill., to Austin, Minn., at the age of 12," she remembers, "but it was one of the best things that ever happened to me."

For five years, Steuer called New Orleans home, long enough for both of her daughters to be born. In the winter of 1994, they moved to La Crosse, "so this is the longest I have ever lived anywhere," she says.

Steuer attended the University of Minnesota and changed majors several times, never completing a degree. ("I had to leave something to do when my girls are gone!" she jokes.) She held several positions before becoming the executive director of the Children's Museum, but her favorite thing about all of them remains the same: the people.

Steuer played a pivotal role in bringing a children's museum to the Coulee Region. As February marks 10 years for the Children's Museum, Steuer reflects on her contribution to our community, and what that contribution has meant to her.



Theresa Smerud, artist & photographer

Briefly tell us about your family.

My girls are wonderful. I credit their father a lot, because I am amazed by their intelligence. I'm thrilled that they are genuinely nice people and hard workers.

Always living a distance from relatives, the girls got an early education in traveling. Every other year, we take a trip somewhere because they would rather travel than do anything else. We have had some great adventures traveling with my boyfriend and his two girls, but we are happy just hanging out, watching movies, and playing games too.

How do you strike a balance between a successful work life and your family life?

Balance? What's balance? I'm the first one to admit I can't do everything well all at the same time, so I go into modes...work mode, home mode, etc. I'm always in kid mode though, whether they are physically with me or not. The divorce does "force" quality time. When you don't have your children as often, the time that you do have with them is sacred. It actually makes it easy to say "no" to everything else.

Working full time was never my intention, but the museum project grew into

a full-time career. The museum is a second home to the girls. It's allowed me the flexibility to be there for the girls, so they have never resented it. They see that I love what I do. I grew up knowing my father loved what he did and it made a lasting impression on me. I'm glad the girls have that same example.

It's been 10 years since the Children's Museum of La Crosse first opened its doors. Do you remember your first inspiration to bring a children's museum to the Coulee Region?

Winter was a shock after being able to play outside with the girls every day in New Orleans. We spent time at McDonald's Playland and the library, but I found myself missing the children's museum in New Orleans and the fun we had there. I wondered if La Crosse could support a children's museum.

My mother was diagnosed with terminal cancer and I was driving back and forth to visit her in Austin. I had a lot of time to think, and that's when the dream of a children's museum started. It really was just a dream, something positive to keep my mind off my mom, but after months of talking about the idea, my mother and father told me to do it. My dad said, "Learn everything there is to know about children's museums," and my mom said,

“Sit up straight and smile and you can do anything!”

How are you different since the museum opened? Has the museum played a role in that?

Along with the gray hair and wrinkles, I am a different person on the inside, and the museum has definitely played a role in all of it. It has been the education of a lifetime! Campaigns and fundraising, architecture and construction, design and fabrication of exhibits, staff and management, marketing and public relations, retail and finances...The list goes on. With no formal museum or management experience in my background, this project was successful because of the many people who got involved early on. Today, people starting museums in other cities call us for advice, and I remember when it was me making those calls.

My mentors along the way have changed me. They have taken their time to help mold me and, in turn, the business end of the museum. They have been extremely patient and kind with me through the years. Our board of directors has always been there for me too, guiding our vision, nudging when necessary, and always helping. Someday I hope to serve on boards and have the impact my board members do on our organization.

Being involved in philanthropy has changed me too. Because of the museum, I have an understanding and appreciation of nonprofit organizations, the people who keep them going, and the role these organizations play in our community and our world. Even in small amounts, giving makes a difference. I see it every day. My girls see it; they understand the importance of giving.

The museum has changed all of us for the better.

Tell us a few of your favorite museum stories.

One story involves a woman who stopped in to thank us. She explained that several months earlier, the shelter that she and her children were staying in had given her passes to come to the

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museum. She had tears in her eyes as she told us the museum was like Disney World to her kids during a really tough time. We couldn't help but get choked up too. Sometimes we are so close to the museum, we take it for granted.

On the lighter side, we are always laughing about what we hear kids say as we walk through the museum. This past summer, a 5-year-old camper told my daughter Caroline that he had been waiting his whole life for Dino Camp! Another time, I heard a boy coaching his mom by the fire truck, “You burned dinner again mom, and set the house on fire, and now I'll have to put it out!”


We also ask kids to write down their favorite things and we get the usual responses: “I love the river,” “I love the shadow room,” “I love the climbing wall,” but one visitor wrote, “I love my mom.” Priceless.

What's on your agenda for the next 10 years?

How about a nap? Actually, the big picture is exciting for us. We would like to take the museum to the next level, from good to great in every way. It means exceeding our visitors' expectations every time they visit, and I believe we can do that. We also have dreams of new carpet, a dinosaur exhibit, and a healthy exhibit that gets families moving. We would like to collaborate more with other organizations and continue to seek out families that will benefit from the museum and the fun and learning it provides.

You have been an amazing role model. What advice do you have for others about pursuing a dream and making it come to life?

If you have a dream, do your homework before you dive in. Surround yourself with good people. Don't think you can possibly know it all or do it all yourself. It's nice to have people to share the good times and the bad, and honestly, if you have enough good people behind your project, there probably won't be much bad!

Sit up straight and smile, work hard, and above all else, be nice. 



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