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Congratulations, Amy Lehrman!

Not only are you a leader in the Fort Wayne business community – you’re a trailblazer within our own ranks. From all of us at Katz, Sapper & Miller, congratulations on being named a 2022 Influential Woman of Northeast Indiana!

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Lehrman credits important figures in her life

BY JEFF JONES

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FORT WAYNE — People can set out to be influential purposefully from leading by example.

“I think it’s a little bit of both,” Amy Lehrman said, one of KPC Media/Business Weekly’s Influential Women honorees.

A newly-named partner with the firm Katz, Sapper & Miller, Lehrman has taken the lessons shared with her and encourages others to find ways to make a difference in the community.

One of the ways Lehrman did that impacted her own family — donating one of her kidneys this past April to her older brother Adam, who was in Stage 4 kidney failure.

“People I don’t even know that well, who are just acquaintances, have reached out and said, ‘What an inspiration that process is,’” Lehrman said. “The fact that me going through that process has inspired somebody else to consider living donation or maybe give it a second thought ... has been the most rewarding and unexpected gift.

“My brother got this great gift, but knowing that I could potentially inspire others to



Amy Lehrman

go do the same thing and save somebody else’s life has been the most rewarding part of this entire journey.”

As she sits in her conference room chair, Lehrman said, “I don’t view myself as influential but it’s something I strive to be. My job is to inspire the people that work here and empower them to do the best they can do, grow as quickly and as thoughtfully as they can so they can serve our clients, so that they can serve our community.

“We are very passionate about having our people

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LEHRMAN: *Donated one of her kidneys to her brother*

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involved in the community. We have close to 50 people in our office, and over 40% of them are in the community, either on a board or on a committee. Of our management team, over 70% are involved on a board or committee,” Lehrman said.

“That’s something I think is really critical because KSM came here to be present and make a difference in this community, and we can’t do that without our people.

“It’s something I consciously think about, how people represent KSM in the community, how they represent themselves within the firm and in the community,” she said. “When I think of influential women, I don’t think of myself, I think of other women who have influenced me or are way more deserving of a title than I am.”

For Lehrman, those influential women are

her mother, Donna Crow, her mother-in-law Janice Lehrman, and Junior Achievement President Lena Yarian.

“My mom was always a working mom. My dad was a farmer and a fireman, so he was usually the one who was home with us, who would pick us up at school if we were sick or be with us if we had a two-hour delay.

“I just grew up with this role model of someone who was working really hard to support our family, yet she was at every game, every 4-H show, every event that we had, and provided this really good balance.

“I don’t ever remember consciously thinking about it or realizing how hard it was to have that balance and do both until now,” Lehrman said. “I’m a working mother and it’s impossible.

“Looking back and being able to see that I had that role model helps me realize, ‘You

can do it.’ You’ve got to put family first.”

Her mother-in-law has also played an important role for Lehrman, husband Derek and their three children.

“(Janice) has been there to help with our kids at the drop of a hat,” Amy said. “She lives right next door to us, so she’s constantly helping with our kids, keeping them fed, bathed or in bed when we need her to, or helping run kids to different sporting events.

“When they say it takes a village, it really does, and she’s a big, big part of our village,” she continued. “She always has that very calming presence. I’m a type A personality, kind of high-strung, always go, go, go, and she has the patience of a saint.

“That’s something I think I needed in my life was this calming presence and knowing that everything was going to be OK.

“I feel very blessed with those two.”

Outside of family, Lehrman has found inspiration in Yarian.

“I’ve never met a woman with more passion or desire for change and doing good work than Lena,” Lehrman explained. “She’s just an incredible, incredible woman. If she wants to ask someone to donate even millions of dollars, nobody’s telling Lena no.”

Lehrman also found influence in Steve Warner, who recruited her to join KSM. “Steve is the reason I came to KSM,” she said. “It was the guidance and mentorship that he’s given me to help me grow as a leader and grow in my career.

“I told him, ‘I want to be the Steve for everyone else that you have been for me.’ Everyone deserves to have a Steve, and that’s what I strive to be for our people.”

Away from the workplace,

Lehrman has found her passion in Junior Achievement. She serves on the JA’s executive board and co-chairs the group’s purseology event and teaches JA in a Day at Eastside Junior-Senior High School.

Lehrman said her life was a whirlwind from a period of August 2019 well into the pandemic. That’s when she decided some things needed to change.

She had just been promoted to managing director and went on maternity leave 15 days later. Not long after returning that November, two directors retired.

“When I came back, I had this new title and these new responsibilities that I wanted to do well at,” she explained. “We had a couple of directors retire, so my client load tripled. Then, the pandemic hit and I was

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Congratulations, Amy Lehrman
for being honored with a 2022 Influential Women of Northeast Indiana award.



Amy is a JA volunteer and an executive member of the JA Board of Directors, event co-chair for JA Purse-ology, and event committee member for the JA Wine & Beer Festival.

Thank you Amy and Katz, Sapper, & Miller for your support of Junior Achievement!

CONGRATULATIONS

Michelle Brown - Stohler



ON YOUR LEADERSHIP AND
COMMITMENT TO OUR FAMILY LAW
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Family attorney helps people in crisis

BY OKSANA KOTKINA

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FORT WAYNE – Michelle Brown-Stohler likes helping people in the most difficult times of their lives, she said. That is why she decided to dedicate her life to practicing family law, and she has now been practicing it for 29 years.

“I was raised in a family where education, because my mother is a teacher and problem solving because my father is a lawyer were emphasized,” said Brown-Stohler.

She said that the legal field appealed to her because due to that profession she was able to apply her problem-solving skills to assist people that needed help, and it also provided “an ample income” for her.

After graduating law school, Brown-Stohler decided to return to her hometown Bluffton, in Wells County, and in 1993 and she became the first female attorney in Wells County.

“I thought that was really important because that’s where my dad had his law firm, and that’s where “I was raised as a little girl,” said Brown-Stohler.

She was well received in her hometown because Wells County officials wanted to see local graduates that came back to the community. Brown-Stohler started in general practice until about two years later that evolved into the family law field where she found her niche, she said.

Being able to guide people through a difficult time in their lives – that was what appealed to Brown-Stohler in family law. She soon realized that no matter how stressed her clients were, she was still capable of listening to them and working with them



Michelle Brown-Stohler

through those problems.

“I realized that I was good with being able to guide people through a very difficult time in their life and going through a divorce is a horribly emotional and stressful time for the client,” said Brown-Stohler.

She also liked seeing how her clients were becoming stronger by the end of the process – more responsible and more confident about their lives. For that, practicing family law was although challenging, but also very rewarding for her.

“Because you can see the people going through the process and being successful in the end,” said Brown-Stohler.

Brown-Stohler never had a case that she felt like she failed, and one of her most memorable cases dates to the early 1990s where she represented a father who argued for custody over his three daughters.

“Which was very rare at that time in a small Midwest county,” she said.

Brown-Stohler and her client managed to “break that mind pattern,” as she put it, and win custody over the girls, who are now

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Inniss connects others with their best selves

BY STEVE GARBACZ

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For Erlinda Inniss, the middle is where she's used to operating.

As a medium and operator of a spiritual wellness business, she's in the middle, the conduit helping people to connect to their best selves.

But, for a moment, it's time for Inniss to step out in front as one of KPC Media's Influential Women of Northeast Indiana.

Inniss is connected to the metaphysical, but has also worked over her life to ground herself in her community and the people who live there, helping them along in life's journey.

Her journey started in youth, when she started working as a medium, a person who helps connect the living with those who have passed on. She started young and took her gifts worldwide, working with people to reach loved ones on the other side. She's also worked as life coach and spiritual adviser for individuals over the years, helping people step into the best version of themselves, she said.

"It runs in my family.



Erlinda Inniss

I did it since I was 13. I traveled and things like that for quite some time," she said. "Mediumship is basically connecting with those who have passed on. Like I said I traveled and did that worldwide for some time. That's what most people know me for."

Then came 2020 and Inniss and her family found themselves in Angola, while she was looking to take a next step.

That next step was taking the plunge and opening her own store, Willow Tree Shoppes, a spiritual wellness center and metaphysical shop.

"I really came to Angola

because I guess I was more guided to do so. So we came here, just kind of had a friend who had a house her and wanted to rent it out," Inniss said. "A lot of people say it was a really bad year but 2020 was a really good year for us with opening, everything was great."

Taking that next step was an opportunity to step out and take the lead herself,

"Before I started doing what I'm doing, I was in a very man-led industry beforehand, so that was a really difficult one for me because it was always 'Do this job wonderfully and perfectly and I want you to meet my expectations' but I was always doing phenomenal but doing it for somebody else," she said.

Through Willow Tree Shoppes, Inniss connected into the community, hosting an Angel Tree for Christmas and gathering presents for 150 families and contributing in other ways.

Her time in Angola suffered a turn, however, as her family became targets of some local harrasment, including a vandalism incident in which racist graffiti was spray-painted inside her shop.

Willow Tree Shoppes in Angola was shuttered, but Inniss decided to take another leap and rented space in the Glenbrook Mall in Fort Wayne, reopening the shop Oct. 1 in the second-floor corner near the food court and elevator that used to rent partial spaces to small vendors.

The new location includes all of her product offerings, including a crystal salt room as a wellness treatment where people can also relax, re-center and re-align their mood.

"We're looking to make the best of the situation and look at it as a blessing in disguise," Inniss said of the move to Fort Wayne.

As a female medium and business owner, Inniss said stepping out can sometime be daunting and that women often can face pressure when trying to make something of their own. A married mom with two kids, Inniss has been there herself.

It's also tempting to shy away from seizing the opportunity by excusing yourself because you're too busy or stereotypes of what women need to do for their families.

But confidence is key and

believing that you deserve the things you want is a powerful first step toward growing as a person.

"I really would say just believe in yourself no matter what is thrown at you, if you just believe that you deserve it and you can do it, things will line up to do so. I may have a different approach to that with more of a universe spiritual outlook to that and following my gut and my intuition," Inniss said. "If there's a problem or a struggle, that means there is growth there. It's never easy. I always look for which route has more growth, I think as I've followed that, I wouldn't have even stepped into myself, so to say."

Being named an influential woman in the region has been an honor and Inniss hopes to continue helping and inspiring people to find their best selves and advance on their own journeys, too.

"I'm honored and really grateful and I show a lot of gratitude to whoever did that. I was truly shocked when I got the call and it means a lot and it did help me come out of dark space that I usually don't get into," she said. "It does make a difference."

STOHLER

FROM PAGE 4

successful adults, she said. Brown-Stohler said that they managed to do that because the father of the girls was very responsible, and they managed to present "everything that he did positively in their best interest."

"He focused on the girls and getting the girls through this process instead of himself," said Brown-Stohler.

She said that with divorce rate going up in the U.S., family law has special significance for American society because most of the divorcing couples have children, and the arguing sides need to learn to focus on their children, and

family attorneys can help that.

"We want them to focus on the children, in the best interests of the children, so that they then become better citizens as they grow up, it affects the overall community," she said.

Brown-Stohler relocated to Fort Wayne nine years ago. Her husband, Mike Stohler, was promoted to the general position in the air guard, she said, and he is a Delta pilot too. Their son, Carson, 21, goes to Hillsdale College, Michigan.

Brown-Stohler said despite neither she nor her husband having 9-to-5 jobs, a lot of support for her career comes from her son who wants to go to law school upon graduating from college, and

her husband.

"I've always supported his career as far as being a fighter pilot in the military, and he has always supported my career in law," she said.

Brown-Stohler said that it was also very important to set boundaries to be there both for her clients and for her family. She said that with time she realized that there was just a certain number of cases she could handle to serve her clients adequately.

"We basically are doing a constant balancing act of trying to manage our professions, and then also trying to be the best parents that we can be for our son," she said.

After relocating, Brown-Stohler kept traveling

back and forth to Wells County until she started up her recent position at Carson law office in Fort Wayne in June 2022. She said she felt inspired by the corporate culture of her new office where the attorneys shared the value of putting their clients interests first.

"That's their priority, and that inspires me because we are all in the same boat, we all agree that we need to focus on the best representation for our clients," said Brown-Stohler.

"It's preparation, preparation, preparation in family law," she said.

What inspires Brown-Stohler herself in family law to this day is seeing a client who is

weak and emotionally destroyed "coming through the process, and becoming an independent man or woman."

Brown-Stohler also takes some pro bono cases recommended to her by volunteer legal services, organization, and church members. She considers it to be a responsibility of every attorney of the legal profession to help those people "that are indigent, that need representation."

"I had the ability and still have the ability to listen to the clients and then work with them through these problems to be able to get them to the other side where they are stronger people," said Brown-Stohler.

Foundation leader empowers leaders, fights poverty

BY SHERYL PRENTICE

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AUBURN — Sarah Payne, the new executive director of the Sweitzer Family Foundation, has focused her leadership development effort on getting diversity to the table and listening to the voices around that table. She was nominated as an Influential Woman in the category of leadership development for that success.

Her nomination essay said this about Payne:

“Through consistent and heartfelt action, Sarah drives the community and the region toward excellence — excellence in economic development, excellence in leadership, excellence in progressive innovation, excellence in



Sarah Payne

meaningful connectivity, and excellence in advancement. Through her volunteer work and advocacy efforts, Sarah empowers leaders in education, business, government, non-profits and

medical networks to come together and work toward a common goal. Sarah champions projects and causes that will transform the community to be more inclusive, successful, culturally rich and empowered.”

Payne said she noticed a gap in leadership as she served in various capacities in DeKalb County, and wanted to do something about it.

“Boards often operate in the same way for many years,” Payne said, “And what a loss that is.”

Payne is vice president of Fortify LEADS, the arm of the Schweitzer Family Foundation that deals with leadership development. The foundation also is working to reduce poverty and homelessness in the area

with Fortify Home.

People living in poverty often grapple with multiple issues that keep them from building security, Payne said. A portion of a former hotel has been renovated to provide housing for the homeless.

“Poverty is like a bowl of spaghetti,” Payne said. “It’s a tangled mess. Our big mission is that we are focused on helping our neighbors.”

Payne was a founder of DeKalb LEADS when it formed in 2020, funded by a 2019 Lilly Foundation grant. The group sought to address DeKalb County’s leadership gap by looking at who would be good resources for leadership development and who would support that work.

The coronavirus pandemic got in the way of the grant-funded work, but the group pressed on. DeKalb Leads was the only grant recipient that continued to pursue leadership development, holding two cohorts of potential leaders in 2020 and 2021. The 2022 cohort was a mixed group of ages and experiences.

Now Payne will have the task of steering leadership development through Fortify LEADS. Payne had a conversation with Sweitzer Family Foundation president Jason Sweitzer about the sustainability of DeKalb LEADS.

“He asked me, ‘If you could start over in DeKalb

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Losh utilizes marketing skills to benefit her business

Gives back to the community in many ways

BY ANDY BARRAND

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Looking to put her marketing degree from Indiana-Purdue University Fort Wayne — currently Purdue University Fort Wayne — to use, Fort Wayne native Sarah Losh saw an opportunity coming out of the COVID-19 pandemic and seized it.

Losh, who has been honored as a KPC Media/ Fort Wayne Business Weekly Influential Woman, started a night market as a way to promote her business Healing Hands Spa & Boutique, located at 6527 Covington Road.

She opened her business in October 2019 shortly before COVID-19 took hold in northeast Indiana. The pandemic forced her to close up operations of her spa and boutique for several months until reopening in April 2021.

It was then she seized the opportunity to not only promote her business, but support other local small businesses within the Fort Wayne area. The Healing Hands Night Market was born out of that. From its simple beginnings of eight



Sarah Losh

vendors gathering at her business, it has grown to an average of 70 vendors converging on her property once a month for a night market celebration.

"I just thought everyone needed to get back on their feet," she said.

She said the monthly markets currently draw a wide variety of artisans and vendors selling their wares. The events feature everything from vendors booths to fire spinners, face painters, food trucks and other entertainment.

"We literally try to have something for everyone," Losh said. "We are the first night market in Fort Wayne and that is a big deal. The public loves the markets, we seem to attract a wide variety of people."

She said the market has

been a benefit to the spa and boutique because it has brought a steady stream of new clientele into her business. Losh has been working as a massage therapist in the Fort Wayne area for the past 21 years.

Growing out of the successes of the Healing Hands Spa & Boutique Night Market came the Fort Wayne Maker's Market, a traveling market, which pops up randomly at locations around the Fort Wayne area. She said these markets, which she organizes, have also become a big success.

"The markets weren't something I was planning on doing, they just sort of happened," Losh said.

When she is not at the spa or hosting one of many markets Losh enjoys stepping back into nature and giving back. Before a storm closed Fox Island in Fort Wayne earlier this year, Losh spent countless hours at the county park walking the trails and enjoying its beauty.

Her love for nature and the outdoors propelled her to revive a Fort Wayne tradition, Solfest, which was held Sunday, Aug. 14 at Parkview Field, instead of its original location at Fox Island. The event, which had been shelved for the past few years due to the organizers age, was

revived this past year.

Losh said it was a hit.

The event features a wide variety of bands, local vendors, food and more with all of the proceeds being given back to Fox Island for the creation of a trail, which is American with Disabilities Act compliant. Proceeds also went back into planting new trees at Fox Island. The park had extensive tree damage during a storm, which blew through the area this summer.

Losh said this year's Solfest raised \$2,000, which allowed 4,000 new trees to be planted at Fox Island.

Proceeds from the 2023 Solfest will go back toward the completion of the ADA trail at the park. She said her plans are to continue to have the festival at Parkview Field because it allows for coverage in case of inclement weather.

A nomination form received by KPC Media/ Fort Wayne Business Weekly said, when Losh isn't hosting a market or working at her spa she is donating her time to a variety of groups. She gives time on a weekly basis to Food Not Bombs, a local group which helps to feed the community at Freiman Square, in Fort Wayne every Sunday at 1 p.m. She is also devoted to raising

money for families in need within Allen County.

"The best part about her is that she does it all so humbly, and constantly thanks the team," the nomination form said. "I don't think many people tell her how amazing she is...and she deserves that."

With the markets and spa successfully running she is looking at the next challenge, which she will get to use her marketing, business and promotions degree for. Her next venture is promoting musical entertainment around the Fort Wayne area, rather it be open mic nights or full fledged shows.

"I am finally able to do things my degree taught me," she said. "I still love massage work, but I love doing stuff that benefits the community. We sort of dabble in a lot of areas."

The single mother said none of this would be possible without the help of her sidekick and boyfriend Josh Wiley.

"I couldn't do it without him," she said.

For more information on the Healing Hands Spa & Boutique Night Markets or the Fort Wayne Maker's Market visit their Facebook pages. The Fort Wayne Maker's Market operates as an open group on Facebook.

PAYNE

FROM PAGE 6

LEADS, what would you change?" Payne said. "It was replication."

Sweitzer tapped Payne for the foundation's executive director and they began building a program to expand into other counties. The 10-month program

includes a three-day retreat and monthly programs with speakers on a variety of diverse topics.

"The magic is we look to create individual leaders," Payne said. "The magic happened in local engagement."

The foundation opened its Fortify Home building in August, serving 20-25 neighbors from DeKalb

County who are living there. Payne said anyone with addictions is referred to the appropriate agency for help.

"We are not busing people in, they are already here," Payne said.

Payne earned two bachelor of science degrees in retail management, and sales and sales management from Purdue University. She is certified as a Certified

Gallup™ Global Strengths Coach, Certified Dare to Lead™, Indiana University Lilly School of Philanthropy Fundraising for small non-profits; and Advancing Voices of Women Campaign Institute.

Her career path includes retail management, property management and leasing, and general economic development.

Her work in the non-profit sector includes, program director at IPFW's river Fest, executive director of the Auburn Cord Duesenberg Festival, health care and fundraising, director of DeKalb and Noble foundations for Parkview Health, and director of community outreach for DeKalb Health. She also ran for elective office.

Lana Keesling: mother, community leader, business owner and politician

BY EMELINE HAWKINS

From small-business owner to Fort Wayne's city clerk, that's the journey Lana Keesling has made, one small impact at a time.

It's been a journey of ups and down, but she wouldn't change a thing about it, Keesling said.

"I had absolutely no interest in politics. My mother always worked the polls and voted. It was when my daughter came home in second grade and said she wanted to be a politician," Keesling said.

After that point, the pair started attending various political events together.

"I was driving her because she couldn't drive herself, obviously," Keesling said with a laugh.

Through getting to know



Lana Keesling

the political members in the community, Keesling herself became part of the Richard G. Lugar Excellence in Public Service series in 2013-14. It was very much an

honor for her, she said, because only 20 women are picked each year to participate.

The organization helps women get involved in politics. It was started nearly 35 years ago as a fundraiser for Lugar's political campaign, back when women didn't really have a place in politics.

Through the series, it offered Keesling the opportunity to meet other strong women such as State Sen. Liz Brown, former mayoral candidate Linda Buskirk, and Indiana State Treasurer Kelly Mitchell, who also wanted to make a positive impact on their communities.

Even years later, Keesling knows she can rely on other Richard G.

Lugar Service alumni to encourage her and be supportive of whatever initiative she has in mind.

Therefore, when the post of city clerk became available in 2016, an opportunity presented itself.

"My daughter had an internship for (former U.S. Rep.) Marlin Stutzman at the time and suggested I run for city clerk," Keesling said.

The more she thought about it, Keesling said, the more she wanted to try.

"I was ready for a change. Win or lose, this was an opportunity. I didn't think I would win, but I won both the primary and election with 65% of the vote. It was quite the achievement," she said.

As city clerk of Fort Wayne, Keesling handles the city seal and any documents that need to be signed or certified as well as the original city charters and legislative documents of Fort Wayne. She also sits at the City Council tables, doing all of the agendas and making sure city codes are up to par.

Another of her duties is overseeing the violations bureau for parking, which includes seven officers, as well as Animal Care and Control officers.

Something she's proud of during her time as clerk is the installation of 800 new parking meters purchased for downtown Fort Wayne without the use of taxpayer dollars.

SEE KEESLING, PAGE 9

Pastor leads by service to community

BY SUE CARPENTER

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FORT WAYNE — Annie Epling always wanted to be a church pastor.

But her journey to lead the congregation at First Presbyterian Church in Fort Wayne in 2018 was paved by touching many lives along the way through community service.

Rev. Dr. Epling earned her Bachelor of Arts degree in Religious Studies from Connecticut College, a Master of Divinity Degree from Louisville Seminary, and a Doctorate degree from McCormick Seminary in Chicago.

Her community ministry began with high school and college mission trips.

"Something that has been kind of part of my ministry from the very beginning is from those summers spent in Appalachia, the high schooler



Annie Epling

doing mission trips there, being in southeast Alaska one summer in college, to organizing interfaith volunteer caregivers — for me, it's always been about the people," said Epling.

Typical of her leadership, Epling insists that persons of faith must engage in the difficult issues that challenge our society, and work for justice and reconciliation.

Her work has been marked by clear vision and fearlessness, rooted in the teachings and the example of Jesus, and fully engaged with the needs of the world.

And that work was put to test in her own back yard in October 2020.

It was during pandemic restrictions two years ago that George Floyd was murdered by police in Minneapolis sparking nationwide protests that spilled into the streets of Fort Wayne, causing damage to some downtown businesses.

"We all saw this on our TV screen, and it was like — we have to do something," she recalls.

The next morning, Epling arrived early to help with the downtown cleanup and to check on downtown residents. She attended the Mayor Tom Henry's press conference and met up with

other pastors who were also downtown that morning.

Returning to the church, she phoned the Rev. Dr. Bill McGill, senior pastor of the Imani Baptist Temple in Fort Wayne. "Bill is a Black pastor who has been in Fort Wayne forever and has had a relationship with the First Presbyterian Church for a long time. I asked him, what can we do?"

In seeking unity, a community-wide outdoor prayer vigil was held outdoors that brought church leaders from across the city — many who had never met or worked together before — but they came together to pray for the peace of the city and justice for George Floyd and other victims of police violence.

"Things by that point — protests had already erupted downtown, you could see the tension was building. So that's what we

did. A bunch of pastors got together, six or seven of us, met at the Lutheran Park near the Imani Temple, with our folds, about a couple hundred people and had a time of prayer to help, that's our role, to have a moment of calm, in the midst of everything that was going on.

"That was just a feeling of we have to do something. This is a time when the church should be speaking. And speaking out about what happened to George Floyd, why it was wrong and what can we do," she adds.

In late August 2020, she and Misti Dawn, minister of the Unitarian Church at the time, started to lead Sacred Conversations on Race at Lakeside Park, again bringing together people from the community, various churches "to talk about that

SEE EPLING, PAGE 11

Purdue Fort Wayne department chair shares drive with students

BY MATT GETTS

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FORT WAYNE — She's making the future brighter in the present by following the trailblazers of her past.

Purdue University Fort Wayne's Kimberly O'Connor chairs the university's Organizational Leadership Department, where she influences the next generation movers and shakers.

"We teach our students to be our future leaders," O'Connor said.

Skills taught in organizational leadership include such topics as conflict management, servant leadership and collaboration.

"It's so important that students... have the ability to work well with others," O'Connor said.

O'Connor is one of two women department chairs in the university's College of Engineering, Technology and Computer Science.

She became a full-time professor at the university 10 years ago, and took on the department chair position Jan. 1, 2022.

"The transition has been very straightforward,"



Kimberly O'Connor

O'Connor said. "I have wonderful colleagues."

Her climb to a leadership role hasn't been impacted much because she's a woman, she said. Purdue Fort Wayne has fostered an environment of elevating people based on what they bring to the table.

"It's not so gender-based," she said. "For me, in my path, there's always been support.

"I've been lucky to be surrounded by a lot of influential women. I try to follow in their footsteps."

O'Connor is more leader than follower these days. And her impact has been felt.

"I have heard many of our female students say they find her to be a strong role model and inspiration," her nomination as an Influential Woman read. "Kim has a reputation for being a detail-oriented, goal-driven person who accomplishes anything she puts her mind to. She's just a genuinely great person to work with who never accepts the status quo."

O'Connor was one of the founding faculty members of the university's Future Girls of STEM summer camp which had its inception in 2019. That program introduces different types of engineering, science and related content to girls in second- through fifth-grade.

"Young girls don't get to exposure to STEM related careers," O'Connor said.

She has also been heavily involved in the athletic programs at Purdue Fort Wayne, going so far as to travel with the basketball team to help them keep up with their coursework.

It's a busy schedule, and O'Connor seems to thrive in the hectic environment.

Originally from Fort

Wayne, she did her undergraduate studies at Purdue University in West Lafayette. She then received her juris doctorate from Loyola College and is licensed to practice law in the state of Indiana. Her goal back then? To become a law professor.

"That was always my draw," O'Connor said.

She served as an adjunct professor teaching law at Purdue Fort Wayne and that morphed into a full-time professorship, teaching employer law to help future leaders understand the legal responsibilities of both being a work supervisor and an employee.

When the chair position opened, she decided to put her leadership organization training into practice.

"It was a wonderful opportunity to use the skills we learn in our leadership courses," she said.

O'Connor still teaches, and for her, that's a very good thing.

"I get to have one foot in each area," she said. "I love to teach. I want to continue educating students."

Or make that three feet in academia. As well as her

roles as teacher and department chair, she is also a researcher.

She has been published 12 times in her research area, which is cyber law. She is reaching issues involves the internet, social media, privacy and sexting.

Her role as researcher is important.

"We have to add to our knowledge," she said.

With the internet being a relatively new phenomenon, it's tough for lawmakers to keep pace.

"The law is always playing catch-up to technology," O'Connor said.

It would be tough to catch-up to O'Connor's schedule as professor, department chair and researcher.

The hectic pace hasn't diminished her passion — or her role as a mentor and someone for young women to look up to.

"The goal is to encourage young women that have leadership goals," she said.

And what advice would she give to women?

"Go for it," she said.

"Whatever your dreams or passion are — go for it."

KEESLING

FROM PAGE 8

Getting to where she is now, though, wasn't always easy, especially having a family and balancing running a business at the same time.

"I worked my way through college, graduated my bachelors with honors and I'm very proud of that," she said.

She holds a Bachelor of Science degree in Business Administration from the University of Phoenix, as

well as an MBA.

Prior to being elected City Clerk of Fort Wayne, Keesling held a chief financial officer position at Commercial Warehouse & Cartage, Inc., managing finances, information technology and human resources, according to the city of Fort Wayne website.

She also ran her own business as president and owner of Deck The Walls from 1990-98.

Keesling's impact stretches further than City Hall and Fort Wayne. She's the current vice

chair for the Allen County Republican Party as well as the current president of the Allen County Republican Women's Group.

She was also named volunteer of the year for the Girl Scouts Northern Indiana Michiana in 2009 and serves on the Metro Human Relations Commission as the vice chair in addition to being on the League for the Blind board.

Her advice to other women out there is to always try, even if you fail and to step out of your comfort zone.

"You can't get ahead by sitting back, even if you fail," Keesling said referring to her run for state treasurer three years ago.

"I saw places I never would have seen. It was a great experience, even though I lost," she said.

While Keesling doesn't plan to stay 38 years like the city clerk before her, the keys to success are to be humble, to have an open-door policy and to take time for her staff every day.

"Women leaders are different than men. We're better building a supportive

network between us. It's not a competition; it's having that network to push women to get out there," Keesling said.

In the future, she hopes to see the wage gap eradicated and see women represented at least 50% at the local level as well as nationally.

"Fort Wayne hasn't had an elected female mayor. I sure hope we have a female mayor and president one day," she said. "I have six daughters — several of them are in areas that are dominated, and we're getting there."


 asher

Megan Bennett
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Kelley nurturing Asher into the next 50 years

BY MIKE MARTURELLO

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FORT WAYNE — Kara Kelley is the true embodiment of an influential woman.

The marketing executive has gone from an employee of public relations firms to now the president of one of the more prominent agencies around, Asher Agency.

"I'm honored to be recognized as an influential woman in northeast Indiana. It brings me such great joy to help grow and nurture teams, and I couldn't be prouder of the team we've built at Asher," Kelley said.

Teaching and nurturing has been a big part of Kelley's life. She has been sharing her knowledge and skills since she was young, as a swimming teacher not only in the United States, but in Croatia.

That has now transformed to the public relations field



Kara Kelley

where Kelley has seen Asher evolve from a local company to one owned by a holding company and now back to a locally owned firm with trusted leadership and employees.

"I love to nurture and grow people. It's something that I've always done my whole life," she said.

Kelley is a graduate of Bishop Luers High School

and the University of Dayton, where she earned a bachelor's degree in public relations and marketing.

Her career took her out West when she worked for six years as an account executive at a boutique San Francisco Bay Area public relations firm.

While in the Bay area, Kelley was a board member of a nonprofit called the Women's High-Tech Coalition. This group was a marriage of the public and private sectors, working together for the greater good of young women and encouraging their professional growth.

The membership reads like a who's who of women's leadership not only in the Bay area, but in the United States.

Fellow Coalition members included Nancy Pelosi, Meg Whitman, Zoe Lofgren, Carly Fiorina and Dianne Feinstein.

Upon her return home to Fort Wayne in 2005, she was an account executive at Boyden & Youngblutt and then joined Asher Agency in 2007, where she quickly rose to become a key member of the Asher management team.

In 2016, Kelley was named president of Asher, a huge accomplishment in the traditionally male-dominated advertising industry.

Kelley is regarded as one of the country's leading retail franchisee experts, and her vision and leadership are respected and in demand at the corporate level.

Before Subway took over marketing duties for all of its franchises, Asher went from handling 13 Subway markets to 63.

"It was like growing an agency in our own agency," she said.

Kelley is an astute team builder who works tirelessly to empower her team and

grow her clients' business.

In 2014, she was named one of KPC Media's "Forty Under 40" business leaders who are making a difference at their job and in their community.

In 2020, Kara was nominated for Greater Fort Wayne Inc.'s Champion of Change Awards.

In July 2022, Kelley became co-owner of Asher Agency.

Asher has been in business for nearly 50 years; however, it was acquired by a holding company 11 years ago. When the opportunity arose, Kelley and others were able to acquire the company and return it to local ownership.

Kelley's co-ownership now makes the longstanding agency a woman-owned business, once again locally owned and operated.

"I'm excited to take Asher into the next 50 years," Kelley said.

EPLING

FROM PAGE 8

again and what a faithful response should be from us."

Epling was appointed as a representative of the religious community when Fort Wayne Mayor Tom Henry organized a task force to investigate local police response to the George Floyd protests in town. After nearly 15 months, the group has made recommendations to the mayor, police and first responders based on community conversations.

Epling's love of God and of God's people has united others in common cause on behalf of the poor and oppressed. She has never failed to challenge systems that prevent women, persons of color, and the LGBTQ community from realizing their dreams. She is proud to serve a congregation that is diverse and welcomes all persons with the love

of Christ, according to her nomination letter.

"I think the favorite part is the ministry is being with others, being with the people and that's in every phase of life, whether it's with the family helping them walk through a memorial service, planning a wedding couple to being out in the community with the Mayor's Commission or it might be a rally for something. I think for me, that's where I get my energy is from being with people."

Epling thanks many mentors along her journey, from her older sister from whom she learned passion for others, her parents who instilled a sense of service and justice, and a lot of women she looked up to through the years who helped and nurtured her along the way.

"I hope I can do that for others, particularly for women. I want to be that person."

LEHRMAN

FROM PAGE 3

trying to keep a newborn alive.

"You can't be all things to everybody at all times and I realized that something's got to give," Lehrman said. "That was where I refocused my energy and thought, 'Where can I be most effective and where do I really want to spend my time?'" That meant stepping away from some groups

while maintaining participation in JA.

She describes KSM as a close-knit atmosphere, with catered lunches a regular feature and where co-workers often gather outside the workplace, such as weddings or baby showers. "It's more than just co-workers," Lehrman said. "We celebrate each other's successes and we lift each other up through failures. We're a very teamwork-focused atmosphere."

"There's nothing I do

here that I do on my own or by myself," she continued. "No single person is doing it all or doing everything. People have good days and bad days. Some days, you have to lean on the rest of your team more than you do other days."

"Our people are working a lot of long hours, so we try to create an environment where, if you're going to spend this much time here with all of these people, you might as well enjoy it, and I think they really do."



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Early sparks the entrepreneurial spirit

BY MARY ANNE GATES

Sherry Early, currently serves as the Executive Director of Incremental Development Alliance (IDA).

"The IDA is a national small-scale development educational non-profit with a mission. The Alliance helps local entrepreneurs and civic leaders strengthen their neighborhoods through small-scale real estate projects. IDA marries two of my passions perfectly, real estate development and entrepreneurial grit," Early said.

Throughout her career, Early has helped residents living in underserved areas who are struggling with low income to own and develop property.

"This is no small task for any community. I work with non-profits and local authorities to help design policies and programs that empower and support residents in



Sherry Early

underserved neighborhoods. This assistance ranges from advocating for greater density and reformed zoning codes, to offering needed capital to cover pre-development costs, and purchasing or rehabbing a property," she said.

Other help Early has provided throughout her career include creating housing programs that

allowed low-income individuals to have access to down payment assistance and home buyer education.

In her current position, Early works with local authorities on zoning and code regulations, as well as educating residents in neighborhoods on how to create greater density. For example, Early explains to people how building a duplex and other multi-family dwellings can provide generational wealth because the homeowner lives in one unit and rents out the other unit.

Early has spent more than 20 years in the housing sector and economic development in both the public and nonprofit sectors.

"First, working in the non-profit sector is a path that I took because of my mother, Lydia Early. My mother raised us as individuals to give back to the community. As children we always saw her

giving back. She ran several non-profits. So, growing up as a child of a non-profit leader made me want to aspire to do the same. Then once I started to participate in that world, I became enthralled and empowered by helping others to become successful in whatever they were doing. Also, (I was) helping remove barriers that I saw many people, and specifically people of color, facing."

Besides working for IDA, Early is involved with the Community Foundation of Greater Fort Wayne.

"When I think about the work, I am currently doing with the Women's Fund at the Community Foundation of Greater Fort Wayne. The three things we focus on that are:

- Economic security, which focuses on the things that keep women and girls from achieving their full economic potential.

- Personal safety, which

promotes programs, and policies to keep women and girls safe.

- Young women and girls, we listen to them and help them make sure their voices are heard. It is important that they know they are celebrated and supported.

"These are things that I support because I have a young daughter, who is 15. I want to make sure she is supported and has a voice," Early said.

The most powerful leadership moments Early is experiencing also hit close to home.

"Raising my daughter. This is the one individual that I feel I have an opportunity to help become a whole and productive, self-loving person. I feel like that is extremely powerful," she said.

Women in leadership roles can face major barriers while achieving their professional goals.

SEE EARLY, PAGE 19

'Bring It' advocates for self-empowerment

BY SUE CARPENTER

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FORT WAYNE — As a childhood abuse and trauma survivor, Tisha Strasser learned at a young age to have confidence in herself to achieve her goals. Enlisting in the military furthered her belief that people, especially women, can achieve anything.

Years later, she was disheartened to see her own daughter navigate anxiety and consequences from low self-esteem from bullying during her pre-teen and teen years.

As a parent wanting to help her child and ultimately the community be better equipped with tools to help with resilience, confidence, self-love and ability to use one's own voice, Strasser sought a way to help young girls.

In response, she founded "Bring It-Push It-Own It"



Tisha Strasser

in 2013 to help others build strength by stepping out of their comfort zone and into their amazing uniqueness.

"It's a mission, a non-profit with a goal to empower others with a voice to know they are worthy and to understand their value," she said.

"Bring It" expanded two years ago to adoptives with

special needs and more recently welcomed women and co-ed groups to the fold. Housed in a two-story brick building on Hoffman Street, small groups gather in the sun-filled rooms for a joyful moment where they exercise to intentional music and messaging.

"We don't play any music that does not have a message, that is empowering. It's asking 'What's your story? How do you love yourself?'"

The method is the music, followed by mindfulness through meditation and a themed workshop, she said.

Strasser's newest venture with "Bring It" has been serving area athletes through the "Bring It Beyond the Athlete" initiative helping athletes thrive beyond the court, field or pitch, to know who they are and what makes them passionate and brings them joy outside their

sport to build tools for their own mental well-being.

The idea evolved following meetings with former professional soccer player DaMarcus Beasley. Her first session was with the Fort Wayne Football Club. The mother of a 21-year-old son, Strasser is also aware of the struggle young men face.

"With boys and men we refer to it as 'fear or struggle' — with girls and women we say 'insecurity' because we see things differently, although they are the same thing," she said.

"We talk about identity if sports were to go — the identity of your value is not based just on sports. A lot of people are having identity crisis between their education, their titles or sports, or things like that. Our high school kids, specifically a lot of boys, are still taught that's still their

avenue for success, and they need to know there is so much more to that and that they are valuable.

"There are also athletes who become depressed because they are used to having structure and movement with a team, and people being excited about them. And when they don't get scouted — they don't know who they are and they are confused. There's anxiety that comes with that, and depression," said Strasser.

Similar to the "Bring It" model, "Bring It Beyond the Athlete" has the same meditation and music components with coaches also participating in the session.

They get silly together and have fun moving their bodies a way they don't move athletically.

"That is something we

SEE STRASSER, PAGE 15

Zwick, leader in diverse fields, is problem-solver

FROM STAFF REPORTS

Megan Zwick's selection as one of KPC Media Group's Influential Women comes as no surprise to Addie Farris.

Farris, a longtime friend, is founder and president of Eco Fest Fort Wayne. Zwick is a board member and vice president.

The two attended Memorial Park Middle School and South Side High School together. Zwick moved on to Trine University, while Farris attended Indiana Tech.

"I adore Megan," Farris said. "I've known her since she was in middle school. Even though we are friends, I know for a fact from other people she has worked with over many years that she is true-to-a-fault, loyal, hardworking. She asks hard questions so we can see answers. She's a problem-solver and she always shows up when we need it."

Eco Fest presents a festival each spring to promote individual and community awareness of sustainability practices.

Farris said Zwick stepped up and said, "I know this is important. How can I help? What can I do?"

Eco Fest also presents workshops throughout the



Megan Zwick

year.

"I'm flattered," Zwick said of her selection and of her longtime friend's comments. "I believe all of us can take little steps to plan better for the future of our company, the environment, the planet. I try to educate myself and educate others about the small things to change in our daily life."

Zwick received her Bachelor of Science in Business Administration from Trine.

She serves as the director of operations and oversees all business systems for MKM architecture + design, a 40-year-old company based in Fort Wayne.

"Last year we opened a satellite office in Indianapolis," she said. Her duties

embrace that office, too. "I wear many hats, so obviously that includes finances, contracts, IT, the day-to-day making sure the business is making smart decisions."

Jenn Storey, a colleague, nominated Zwick for the Influential Women award.

"Megan oversees many avenues of the business, including investment, personnel and operational strategies," Storey wrote. "Megan has been instrumental in working through the challenges of COVID-19 in the workplace and offering support to staff while providing effective solutions to obstacles faced. Her attention to detail has helped MKM streamline business management and client relations. Throughout her time with the firm, her dedication is second to none."

Zwick volunteers for numerous organizations.

She served with the Emerging Leaders Alliance. "We learned a lot, we connected with other young professionals and did speed

networking events and public service activities. It was really fun," she said.

She also serves on a Middle Waves Music Festival committee.

Zwick is one of the founding members of the Nontraditional Employment for Women workshops. "That is one of the projects I'm very excited about," she said. "We are a small nonprofit group and it's our responsibility to connect current high schoolers in Fort Wayne with women who are in nontraditional jobs," she said. She explained that each young woman needs to know she can be an architect or an electrician. Networking is a big part of building that awareness.

"I'm really big on giving back to the community," she said. "Any bits of time I have I like to give back to the awesome groups in Fort Wayne."

Asked to cite an example of a good leader, Zwick named Zachary Benedict, one of the owners of MKM. Benedict encouraged her to

keep networking, she said. "The more people you know the more you learn and grow. I get to see and watch him every day leading his company, leading my peers, leading his peers and it's been very helpful to observe him and how he interacts with others," Zwick said.

"I am a young professional, so I still have a lot to learn," Zwick said. "I think it's really important to remember that we're all human beings and we're all learning and growing at different paces, and you have to give yourself time for reflection and plan for the next time you are in a similar situation and developing your skills."

"Her personal investment in community improvement has no doubt contributed to the vitality of Fort Wayne," Storey wrote in Zwick's nomination. "Megan's kind and curious nature means she is always seeking ways to help others and to learn new things. Her passion for serving those around her, both personally and professionally, is an inspiration."



Congratulations to Megan Zwick for being honored with a 2022 Influential Women of Northeast Indiana award!

Megan's leadership has helped to shape the success of MKM so that we may continue to enhance the health and well-being of our communities through design.



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Meyer using her story to make change across the country

BY RACHAEL HARTMAN

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FORT WAYNE — It may surprise readers to know child marriage is allowed in 44 states. In Indiana, the law was recently changed to allowing 16 and 17 year-olds to get married with approval from a judge to someone up to four years older. Before that the age was 15 years old with parental consent.

The house bill was sponsored by Karen Engleman, but fought for by the people who experienced the impact of child marriage first-hand, people like Genevieve Meyer, whose story has gone on to inspire others to get involved and speak out against the young ages allowed to marry in this country.

Meyer's story begins in southern California. It was fall of 1994, when she was just 14 years-old. Facing her mother's own struggles with mental health and her mother's boyfriend and his violent behavior, Meyer sought many ways to escape.

A favorite of hers was reading. Meyer tells the story of often stopping at a Community Center, where they kept copies of Reader's Digest abbreviated collections. She would stay up late into the night with a flashlight, getting lost in the stories they told.

School was another escape, with Meyer saying, "I really wanted to be in school. I wanted to be a normal teenager."

But a volatile situation at home, and her mother's boyfriend requiring her to spend hours working for him often meant she was not able to go to school, and by sixth grade she was forced to stop going.

Meyer's escape became taking walks in the trailer park her family lived in, amidst the deserts and hills of southern California. At



Genevieve Meyer

the entrance of the park was a 42 year-old man who took quick notice of her – watching her, asking questions and engaging her in conversation.

"I recognized the grooming pattern right away, but I was also trying to get out of home as much as possible," Meyer recalled. "I knew what his goal was and I was trying to balance this."

She began to frequent his home, but soon her mother became aware of where she was going and ended up calling the police. But this man presented himself as a businessman, and Meyer believes her mother thought he was well-off.

"My mother blamed me for what happened," Meyer said, and it was her mother that proposed Meyer marry him.

"I thought it was crazy," she remembered. "At 14 years old you don't get married."

Then came the search of where to have it done. She was taken across state lines to Las Vegas, but they were unable to get married there. Then they tried Utah, where a marriage license was approved, but a judge said no.

Meyer hoped it meant the end. "I thought I was out of this," she said. "I didn't understand what they meant

by marriage. I didn't have a healthy example."

And in spite of her struggles, she was still a kid, wanting to be a normal teenager and go to school.

Meyer even turned to her brother, who was 11 years older than her. She wanted to live with him, but her mother refused, believing this man could provide additional means to her.

Then came the idea to try Mississippi, and in March of 1995, they borrowed his mother's RV and headed that direction. Meyer was just 15 years old. It was on this trip, she became aware of what marriage to him would entail.

"I was scared, uncomfortable. I begged him not to make me do it, and just let me run away," she said. "But I was too afraid to do it."

He was another in a long line of adults that failed her, and at this point her mother had signed her over to him, and he was determined to marry her.

They arrived in Mississippi, got a license and stopped at the courthouse around lunchtime. They were married May 11, 1995 by a judge in the doorway of the courtroom as he was on his way out.

Meyer was in shock. "I was numb. I knew what happened, but I don't remember what was said. Nobody asked if I wanted to marry him, nobody asked where my parents were. Nobody did anything."

They were back in California by Mother's Day, and at this point it was evident he was no business man. They faced several eviction notices, and it became clear to Meyer he had drug and alcohol problems. It was up to Meyer now to make her own means.

"Ten dollars a week is all I had," she said. "I was

eating ramen, trying to figure out how get shampoo."

Embarrassed by her situation, Meyer felt she couldn't turn to normal school. She tried an alternative school option, but getting there was tricky and required a two mile walk one way. Instead, she got a work permit and began her first job.

Meyer said, though, this new-found independence created jealousy for her husband. She told him about the harassment she was experiencing, but instead of helping her, he said it was her fault.

The law said she, at 15 years old, could get married but now, at 17 years old, and the primary source of income, she couldn't sign a lease for a place to live. To avoid being homeless, she and her husband moved in with his mother.

Meyer's desire to be free of him never went away, and by 18 she knew she could sign a lease on her own and didn't need him. That, though, led him to getting violent and putting her in the hospital.

Her brother intervened, and Meyer moved to San Francisco with him. She knew she needed to get a job, but the pressure of so much change became too much.

"I hadn't heard of things like trauma and PTSD. I didn't understand you can't always just pick yourself up and move on."

She made the choice to go back to her mom, who at this time was in Virginia. It was 1999 in the height of Y2K fever. Meyer was 19 years old. But returning to her mother didn't stop the issues that plagued her past. She worried about her younger sister.

"I didn't want what happened to me for her. I made sure to make noise

about that," Meyer said.

Doing so caused problems, and Meyer once again found herself searching for a place to live. She had a boyfriend, and things looked like they were going well. Then her life took a turn when she was raped.

"It seemed like no matter what I did I couldn't escape my circumstances," Meyer said of how she felt at the time.

Homeless and dehydrated, she found herself at the hospital, and after an ultrasound she discovered she was pregnant. It was November and cold, she was 19 and still legally married. Meyer talked to her husband, who started to make promises to her about helping her get on her feet.

"I didn't have options." She sold her car, and used the money to get a bus ticket, and she arrived in San Diego to her husband dehydrated and exhausted. This time, though, Meyer felt she had something to fight for.

"It wasn't just me anymore." Meyer found a job and was promoted to manager at a financial firm, she had her own apartment and her daughter had arrived.

In the beginning, she said, things were fine. After a couple of years she had met someone, and was ready to file for divorce. In that process though, her husband got upset and possessive. He decided to file for divorce and wanted custody of her child. The court did not care about paternity, and ended up allowing him to see her daughter.

Meyer remarried, to a man who was in the military, and she was able to seek legal assistance and health-care.

"I thought things were turning around." Though her

SEE MEYER, PAGE 15

MEYER

FROM PAGE 14

daughter was required to continue to see him, eventually enough had happened Meyer was able to keep her ex from her child. It's how she found herself in Indiana.

"I was stable enough and ready to fight back. He backed off and went away," Meyer said. She said she still hears from him from time to time, and while he doesn't seem to have changed, Meyer has made incredible strides in her life.

Her desire to go back to school was finally fulfilled. She got her GED at 28 with the Literacy Alliance. It was a perfect situation for a now-single mother of three as they offered childcare while she worked on this.

Then on May 11, 2016 she earned her bachelor's degree. The date, Meyer said, didn't hit her at first. May for so long had a heaviness to it, but after seeing her marriage license she remembered that day in the courtroom those many years before. Now, she was able to replace that memory with something positive. Then in 2018 she earned her masters degree. In a 10-year period she was able to earn her degrees, while raising four kids and working.

Now, Meyer teaches part time at Ivy Tech in the medical assistant program, as well as the business department and the School

of Innovation and Entrepreneurship. She teaches in the entrepreneurship certification program.

At first, she wasn't sure about telling her story, saying "I thought what happened to me was a fluke."

In 2015 she read an op-ed published in the NY Times about child marriage, and that is when she became aware of the prevalence of it in this country. She shared that between 2000-2018 300,000 minors were married, and in the vast majority of those cases it is young women marrying adult men.

"The issue of child marriage is diverse and complex," Meyer said. "No two stories are the same, but there are similarities."

She sat on the story for a few years, and in 2018 she was asked to share her story by the Human Library. That was well received and turned into a podcast, which was then picked up by Red Table Talk, a talk show hosted by actress Jada Pinkett-Smith.

Sharing her story has shown her the issue of child marriage effects all communities, and occurs for a number of reasons. There are loopholes in place that continue to let it persist, such as "spiritual marriages" or for religious reasons. Meyer is challenging this as an unhealthy cultural practice.

"It's abuse. Forcing your child to marry someone is

child abuse," Meyer said. "Child marriage is not a choice anyone should have to make, and if it was against the law no one would have to."

Meyer created the Resiliency Foundation. She created it with the hope that other victims of child marriage could find solace and work together to stop the practice.

Today, 79 survivors across the country have come together, some working in advocacy, and others just wanting a place to talk about what happened to them with others that understand.

The foundation is involved in creating peer support groups, covering all sorts of topics including putting together a resume, accessing higher education, media training, understanding your rights, how a bill becomes a law, how to write a letter to the editor, how to contact a legislator and more. Each topic is chosen based on the needs of the participants.

The Resiliency Foundation is also an advocate, working to spread the word about the prevalence of child marriage in the U.S. In doing so, they have participated in 12 different studies related to the topic.

The foundation has also been fighting to change the laws throughout the country.

"Child marriage is not a solution to any problem," Meyer said. "It's

a dangerous situation to put children in. There are great people out there who look out for their neighbors and kids, but there are bad actors and we need laws in place to protect our kids."

The law was changed in Indiana in 2019. The change, Meyer said, was a step in the right direction. It raised awareness of the issue to get the conversation going.

The fight isn't over though, and the goal is to end child marriage state by state. The Resiliency Foundation has been part of successfully raising the age in several states. In Massachusetts it was raised to 18 years old with no exceptions. In Alaska it was raised from 14 to 16. Meyer said they have also had success with a coalition, raising the age to 18 years old across the United Kingdom. Meyer said the organization is currently focused on raising the age in Indiana, Michigan, Illinois and Ohio.

The success that has been achieved is thanks to the many victims who have spoken out, and told their stories before legislators.

"Survivor testimony is the secret sauce to changing legislation. Having someone in front of you saying, 'this is what happened to me' has a lot of weight," Meyer said.

She encourages the public to contact their legislators about the issue,

and reach out to the foundation to learn more.

"I'm happy to coordinate resources and bring people to the table to address these issues."

Meyer continues to share her story, but also knows what happened in her past is just part of her journey.

"To be human is to suffer some loss or tragedy. What happened to me is just a chapter in my book, not my whole story," Meyer said. Her story is proof it "is possible to get to the other side."

Today Meyer reports she has far more good days than bad, and enjoys reading, hiking, gardening, and bringing people together to talk about the big issues. She is supported by her four kids – three girls and one boy – and her husband, Nick, whom she has been with for 15 years.

"I've made peace with my past, I savor my present and look forward to the future."

Mostly Meyer wants other victims of child marriage to know they are not alone, and there is someone out there who can help. There is a "Get Help" link, as well as contact information on the Resiliency Foundation website for those in need. The public can learn more about the foundation, the work it's doing, how to get involved and about the issue by visiting resiliency-foundation.com.

STRASSER

FROM PAGE 12

have to teach, because when they stop doing sports, they don't know how to move their body. And if you are used to movement, and you have stopped, that's where depression sets in," she said.

And by showing self-worth to boys and men, that trickles down to ultimately treating girls and women more positively.

Strasser is also a member of the Joy Rangers, a group of four

'fierce' women who go out in the community to share their message of empowerment to groups and organizations. The foursome includes a member with Down's Syndrome, another with cerebral palsy.

Strasser said the Joy Rangers are not the cookie cutter representation of what a woman is supposed to look like, but a realistic model of relatable women for their audiences. They are hosting a disability advocacy Ted-style talk, "Taking Our Voices Back, Rising Because of Our

Obstacles" on Saturday, Oct. 29 from 10 a.m. to noon at Sweetwater Sound.

Looking forward, Strasser is confident the group that has surrounded her in the past years will be able to continue the mission. She looks forward to spreading her message outside of the Northeast Indiana area in the future.

"I feel like this is exactly what I was meant to do — and now I truly feel I am meant to expand it — and to take my story and to share my goal to show everyone you are the strongest person

you'll ever know. Because you are the only person who can fight your battles.

"I truly do believe as I kind of pass the torch over to an awesome team and we can hopefully bring on more people and get more funding, I think that I have a message that some people struggle with. You can tell people to believe in themselves, but that's not enough. It's how do you create that self awareness. How do you decide you are worth it? That's when you will believe in yourself. We look for other people to fix

us, to give us guidance, and that's OK, but you are truly the only person who knows yourself and your struggle.

"For me, I'm a Christian so God gives me that strength. But everybody's different. Either way, you either have to believe in a higher power, or whatever, to tell yourself that you have to be the strongest person you'll ever know — because why else would you have been made to be you if you can't be strong enough to be you?"

For more information, go to: bringitpushitownit.com.

Pohly proud of what Girl Scout program offers

BY KATHRYN BASSETT

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As CEO of Girl Scouts of Northern Indiana-Michiana, Sharon Pohly is proud of the program that provides girls with strengths both for today and for their futures.

Pohly, who has been honored as a KPC Media/Fort Wayne Business Weekly Influential Woman has been in the position since 2010 after working in the automotive industry and IT for about 25 years.

She holds an MBA in management science and finance from Michigan State University; a certificate in non-profit leadership from Lawrence Technological University; a post-master's certificate in marketing management from Oakland University; and a bachelor's degree from the University of Michigan. She also is a certified project management professional and American Society for Quality Lean Six Sigma Greenbelt.

Prior to her joining the Girl Scout Council as CEO, a family illness had taken Pohly out of the work force for a little over a year, she said.

When it was time to come back to work, she said, she looked at jobs in IT "and they just didn't do it for me, and I kind of thought, in the back of my mind, I wanted to work for



Sharon Pohly

a not-for-profit," she added.

Pohly would go on to run across some job openings for CEOs of Girl Scout councils.

"I looked at the skill set that they were looking for and I looked at my skill set and I kind of said 'I've got the skill set, I just need to tell the story ... I need to be able to explain how my skill set fits in,' which I was able to do," Pohly added.

She interviewed for the position in September of 2010 and stated in late November of 2010.

"It's been a great 12 years," she said.

The Girl Scouting program was nothing new for Pohly. She came to the position as a Gold Award Girl Scout, having joined the program in second grade and continuing until she graduated from high

school.

She noted the prominence of women in influential positions, both as business and civic leaders, who have been Girl Scouts.

About 50% of women entrepreneurs were Girl Scouts, Pohly said. Of women who are in tech leader positions, about 80% were Girl Scouts, she added. About 75% of all current women sitting in Congress were Girl Scouts and every single female secretary of state was a Girl Scout, she added.

Reflecting on her tenure with the Girl Scout council, Pohly said she is proud of the fact that five members of her staff have become certified project managers.

The council also has been investing in its camps and has built two buildings at two of the council's camps while Pohly has been CEO, she said.

"The first is at our camp in Michigan and we built a multi-purpose center that the girls use and attached to that is a bunk house and also a good-sized kitchen so the girls can learn and do cooking classes on-site," she said.

"At our Camp Logan, which is in Syracuse on Dewart Lake, we put in a new troop house which has two sides and can sleep up to 24 girls and four adults. That's got two nice kitchens where girls

can cook, and a fire ring outside and its nestled in where there's a really nice view of nature."

Pohly said girl scout councils use feedback from a national Girl Scout survey to determine what Girl Scouts and leaders most enjoy to help with programming.

Pohly said the council has increased its STEM capability and opened a maker space in Huntertown at Camp McMillan. The council also offers STEM day camp at Camp McMillan every year.

"I think too, one of the things I'm most proud of is the way this council came through COVID and continued to serve girls virtually and to the greatest extent possible while we were all not even coming to work. So I'm really really proud of the work that the members of my staff did and everyone who worked for the council did to make that happen," Pohly said.

"I believe that Girl Scouting truly helps girls become strong women who lead and end up being nominated and accepted as influential women."

Outside of her role with Girl Scouts, Pohly serves on a number of boards and committees.

Currently she serves on the board of directors of the Rotary Club of Fort Wayne, "which I really enjoy because Rotary is all about

service above self and it's really given me an opportunity to give back to the community, which I enjoy tremendously," she said.

"One of the things I've been really involved with is the Rotary Youth Exchange Program. I currently chair the Rotary Youth Exchange Committee ... and I'm also what they call the Youth Exchange Officer."

Right now, the club has an in-bound student from France who is attending Snider High School and an out-bound student from Snider who is in Italy for a year.

"I was an exchange student when I was in high school and I know the value that it brings — brought to me — and so I like to give back to help students have that same kind of experience," she said.

Pohly also serves on the governance committee for Erin's House for Grieving Children.

"Erin's house is an organization whose mission is very important to me," she added.

In her personal life, Pohly is the mother to an adult daughter who was adopted from Russia. She has a bearded Collie, who is entering his first show in November. She is a swimmer and tries to swim at least 20 miles a month, and has a beautiful begonia garden, which she enjoys tremendously, she said.

We salute our CEO, Sharon Pohly, for being named a 2022 Influential Woman of Northeast Indiana.

girl scouts
of northern indiana-
michiana



Ellen Cutter works to grow Fort Wayne

BY MARY ANNE GATES

Ellen Cutter, chief economic development officer of Greater Fort Wayne, Inc (GFW) is a specialist in city planning and growth. She manages business retention, business attraction, downtown development, and workforce development activities for the city of Fort Wayne.

"I grew up in Chicago and always loved experiencing cities big and small. Just understanding the jobs that are present, the neighborhoods, the local businesses. I wanted to know what gave each community its own local flare and unique economic engine," Ellen Cutter, chief economic development officer of Greater Fort Wayne, said.

On the way to becoming a lawyer, Cutter discovered a new career — urban planning.

"I thought I was going to go to law school. In my senior year of college, I discovered urban planning was a career. I didn't know that, previously. I took a year off and volunteered with AmeriCorps. I worked in community development. I was a grant writer and project manager in rural Oregon. Afterward, rather than go to law school, I got a Master's in City and Regional Planning at Georgia Tech (Georgia Institute of Technology)," she said.

AmeriCorps brings volunteers together to work stateside much like the Peace Corps works with volunteers overseas.

In her current role as Chief Economic Development Officer for GFW, Cutter specializes in the growth and development of the city.

"My passion and my focus is economic development. Within that I have focused on research. I love numbers. I love understanding the data and then using that to influence strategy," she said.

Cutter's duties for GFW include:

- Business retention that is all about talking to businesses and listening to what business community leaders have to say.



Ellen Cutter

"Here at Greater Fort Wayne, Inc. we visit 500 businesses in Allen County every year. We need to be talking and listening to our business community. So, that we can be responsive to both the challenges and the opportunities," she said.

- Business attraction shows off Fort Wayne to best advantage to potential investors.

"We market Fort Wayne and Allen County as a place for investment through our website, marketing deliverables and external outreach. Our mission is about building a nationally recognized economy. We are getting there. More and more companies are reaching out directly to us to understand how they can be a part of the growth," Cutter said.

- Downtown development showcases the downtown area and the opportunities available.

"The No. 1 issue businesses have locally and nationally is workforce. It is all about workforce, right now, Cutter said. Adding, "GFW commissioned a survey in 2019. We found that 90% of Allen County businesses indicate the revitalization of downtown Fort Wayne has played a strong roll in their ability to attract and retain the talent they need. What that means is having a healthy downtown, and a regional destination for a competitive business climate," she said.

"We seek to promote public and private partnerships. The city of Fort Wayne has done an amazing job shepherding the riverfront plan which is a four-phase plan. The public investments are really designed to attract private development around them. For example, Promenade Park was a \$25 million investment. There is now \$250 million in private investment occurring around it," Cutter said.

- Workforce development activities connect potential employees with employers looking for a dependable workforce.

Our partner, Northeast Indiana Works is the lead organization engaging our workforce and bridging them with our workforce development partners.

"We have a program at GFW called Made By Me. It is a coalition of over 100 businesses, plus Allen County public and private schools. The goal is to educate students about the high wage career opportunities in advanced manufacturing and skilled trades. We talk to about 4,000 high school students every year," she said.

After Cutter discovered her niche was urban planning her experience growing up helped her understand some of the barriers people face while job hunting.

"I grew up low income. I have some experience with transportation and child care barriers. Some of those things that families experience when they are really looking at job

opportunities," Cutter said.

Later, as she established herself professionally a healthy dose of confidence, setting boundaries and defining expectations went a long way in overcoming other barriers.

"The most significant barrier I had was (building) confidence earlier in my career. The confidence to lead and the confidence to make clear what I need to be supportive and do my job effectively, I am fortunate that I learned those lessons early in my career. I think I have been a better leader for it," Cutter said.

Adding, "As I grew in my career, I understood, especially as a working mom, I needed to set clear boundaries or expectations. And, if I didn't do that, nobody else would do it for me," she said.

Building confidence, setting boundaries and working in a supportive environment is key to Cutter's success.

"I am fortunate enough that Greater Fort Wayne Inc has a phenomenal culture that has been built by John Urbahns, our CEO. Really, that has been incredibly helpful. I have three little girls. A husband who has a job and a business. My mom is with us here. We have got a lot to juggle," Cutter said.

Urbahns also serves as president of Greater Fort Wayne Inc.

Significant cultural change in the workplace goes beyond trying to juggle work and

family life by yourself.

The most significant change culturally I have seen in the workplace is the acknowledgement that we are all full people with personal lives and passions outside of the office. Companies that have really done a great job of professional development, with reasonable levels of flexibility, and with addressing the disparities that underrepresented professionals in leadership positions have experienced, those are the companies that are at an advantage from a workforce and talent attraction perspective," Cutter said.

The most powerful leadership moment for Cutter came earlier this year. The creation and rollout of the Allen County Together (ACT). The plan detailed the path for building a nationally recognized economy in the Fort Wayne community.

"I think the development and the rollout of Allen County Together has been the leadership moment I am most proud of to date," Cutter said. Adding, "It is the first economic development strategy we have had for the community in ten years. I am really proud of how we put that plan together... I was struck by the excitement, the diversity of leadership and the buy-in. I am very proud of that plan. We are in our first year of implementation and it has been phenomenal. The excitement, the collaboration, and the results we are starting to see are amazing."

Congratulations, Ellen Cutter!

From your team at



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3Rivers Congratulates Amy Ballard

for being **recognized as part of Influential Women of Northeast Indiana**. Amy knows the meaning of hard work and dedication, and **we are proud of her accomplishments and service to our community.**



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Ballard commitment to community part of her success at 3Rivers

BY PATRICK REDMOND

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KENDALLVILLE — In less than 15 years, Kendallville resident Amy Ballard has enjoyed an almost meteoric rise up the corporate ladder at 3Rivers Federal Credit Union.

Ballard, who started with 3Rivers as a part-time service representative, today is the credit union's Assistant Vice President of Branches, an upper-level leadership position she said was created especially for her.

"I love my job," she said. "I love what I do."

Ballard's role is to help oversee several branch locations, as well as oversee the new account origination process, work on process improvement, help recruit new talent to the credit union, and, finally, where possible, reduce friction, she explained.

Ballard admits she had a lot of help climbing to the top. Other professionals, other professional women, helped her along her journey, acting as mentors and teaching Ballard the fine details about the world of financial services. She encourages others to seek out



Amy Ballard

mentors as well.

"I always looked up to other women in positions of leadership, so I just asked them to mentor me. That helped," she explained. "I always encourage others to find someone who inspires them and ask them to be a mentor."

After graduating from Lakeland, Ballard attended Ball State where she planned to earn a degree as a paralegal, but she left school early and came home and started looking for work.

Ballard arrived at 3Rivers after spending nearly a decade

working in retail banking. She started her financial career as a teller for a small, start-up bank that set up shop in Howe. She said that the bank opened with no customers.

"Zero. We had no customers," she recalled.

But she loved the work. Even as a child, Ballard says she's always had a knack for numbers. Math in school, she said, came easy to her.

"I remember being in fifth grade, up at the chalkboard, and my teacher would have students do math races," she explained. "I never had to write anything down. It always came naturally to me."

And although 3Rivers Federal Credit had a humble beginning in 1935, as International Harvester Company Fort Wayne Federal Credit Union with just \$250 in assets, it has since grown to be a large regional player, with assets in excess of \$2 billion.

According to its website, 3River's mission at 3Rivers Federal Credit is to go above and beyond simply banking, enhancing the lives of people in the communities they serve

through three key initiatives: financial literacy, education, and health and wellness.

"We know that what matters most to one of our members likely differs from what matters most to another," the website reads. "We believe that meaningful relationships and conversations go a lot further than the products and services we have to offer and that truly getting to know you is the key to helping you achieve your financial goals and dreams."

The credit union surveyed its member to learn what they wanted and said the responses varied greatly. But those results also showed several common themes—almost all of which tie into the collective goal of creating a brighter future and experiencing financial freedom, it said.

The top five dreams included creating a secure retirement account, paying down existing debt, creating an emergency fund, breaking the cycle of living paycheck to paycheck, and saving for future expenses.

Ballard said 3River's commitment to the communi-

ties it serves is another reason she loves working for a credit union.

"I love working for a credit union because a lot of what we do is giving back to the community, and we do it in many different ways," Ballard added. "We volunteer. In fact this month, we closed down all our locations for a day and encouraged our entire team to volunteer. This year, we built ramps for Habitat for Humanity. I love that. Plus, we also have the 3Rivers Foundation, so we give back monetarily to the community as much as possible."

Community is important to Ballard. She and her husband live in Kendallville where they are raising their six children. In addition to working at 3Rivers, Ballard also is a member of the Kendallville City Council, where she serves on the city's finance committee. That too is a job Ballard said she loves. She was caucused in for her first year on the council and then won election to her current term.

"It's something else that I enjoy," she said of her time on the council.

EARLY

FROM PAGE 12

"Barriers for women and more significantly for me as a woman of color are economic security and, personal safety. For me, economic security is a barrier because of equal pay rights, and access to jobs that I have been qualified for but were not considered for," Early said.

Overcoming barriers sometimes means carving out a professional life on your own terms.

"I can't say I have overcome the barriers. In some ways, I have decided to live my life on my own terms. I decide when and where I go...I select organizations to work for not just because of what they pay, but because

I have a true belief in their mission. Making choices like that is how I have decided to deal with such barriers," she said.

Her advice to the next generation of women especially to women who choose to work in a male-dominated field is simple and straightforward.

"I work in the world of real estate development, architecture, and planning. With all those things the first individual that comes to mind is a male figure. I am an anomaly in my own field. So, what I would say to young women coming up is don't allow others to determine what and who you are, and where you want to be. I think we spend a lot of time trying to conform, we need to accept that we fit already,"

When it comes to women supporting other women in the workplace there are different ways to be supportive. Sometimes you can see the support and sometimes it is done behind the scenes. Advocating for benefits and accommodations that support working women is one way to show support.

"I think there are many ways women can support other women. For instance, in my previous employment situations I have advocated for other women unbeknownst to them because I was in a position of authority, or I was in senior management," she said.

Meaningful changes in the workplace culture are still on the horizon for Early.

"As much as I want to say there is change, I think there

is a greater awareness of the need for diversity in the workplace. The awareness and discussions are taking place. I think that has opened the door for greater change in the future. Just because that talk is happening doesn't mean it is being realized. You should be able to see it when you look at the employees. You should feel it when policies are written... It should be more than just a statement on your website... ,she said.

Upcoming IDA workshops that help people further their personal and professional development are currently scheduled for this fall.

The Creighton Home and South Wayne neighborhoods have received a grant from the Greater Fort Wayne Community Foundation to

bring IDA training to their respective neighborhoods.

"We plan to host several introductory workshops. The first is set to be offered in November or early December. Trainings are a mix of virtual and in-person sessions," Early said.

The Incremental Development Alliance is a national organization that is licensed out of Georgia. Early is based in Fort Wayne. Call 1-855-462-3382 to make an appointment. Or email searly@incrementaldevelopmentalliance.org to learn dates, times and locations of upcoming workshops.

Community Foundation of Greater Fort Wayne
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- Input Fort Wayne

Owner Virginia Richardson is launching an Institute for students and people with disabilities. They will learn fundamentals of technology and media (video production, audio production, web design, graphics, animations and basic computer skills, just to name a few).