

Sara Schastok, Evanston Community Foundation CEO



Sara Schastok, president and CEO of the Evanston Community Foundation. (Chuck Berman, Chicago Tribune)

By Leslie Mann, Special to Tribune Newspapers

AUGUST 10, 2014

Sara Schastok took the scenic route to Evanston, starting from her rural Michigan roots, to India and then various U.S. college campuses before landing in Evanston in 1983.

As president and CEO of the Evanston Community Foundation, Schastok oversees a nonprofit that benefits myriad causes in the city: the arts, education, employment, family support, health and housing. Since she took the ECF's reins in 2001, the amount of funds under its management has grown from \$3 million to \$19.3 million.

Being a nonprofit director is a second career for Schastok, who taught Asian art history at Northwestern University and the School of the Art Institute of Chicago, among others.

"Sara is not just an administrator, but a real doer," said Jay Lytle, a member of the committee that hired Schastok. "With a nonprofit, you have to be able to fill the photocopier in the morning, then oversee a multimillion-dollar campaign in the afternoon."

In 2011, the Evanston Chamber of Commerce awarded Schastok its Community Leadership Award.

Schastok has a bachelor's degree in government, master's in Asian art and a doctorate in Asian/Indian art. She lives in Evanston with her husband, Horst, and their cat, Markka — a rescue pet whose name coincidentally is one letter's difference from the Markha River in India. They have two grown children, Rachel and Christopher. Following is an edited transcript of our conversation.

Q: What sparked your early interest in Asia?

A: My family hosted an exchange student, Hema, from India. Then when I was at Cornell (University), majoring in government, I realized two hours had flown by while I was in the library studying Indian art. That was my passion, I knew.

After teaching, though, I started a career in nonprofit development because there were fewer tenure-track jobs in South Asian art after the Vietnam War. At the time, I didn't realize how closely aligned U.S. foreign interests are with academia, but that's the trend. (The shift began leaning) toward Japan.

Q: You visited India often. How did that affect you?

A: I learned what it was like being the one who looked different and how we judge people by their looks. (I saw) that human joy between a grandparent and grandchild exists even among pavement dwellers whose clothesline is a barbed-wire fence. Not to romanticize extreme poverty, but the point hit home that one does not need all the things that drive the U.S. economy.

Q: Describe the Evanston Community Foundation when you took the helm.

A: I was the first full-time, paid staff member. We didn't have money to expand the foundation itself. We had no email list, no website. Fortunately, someone stole our old computers one weekend, so the insurance bought us three new ones.

We held 36 public meetings and "listening sessions" to determine the community's challenges/problems/concerns and how to change the picture.

Q: Explain the cradle-to-career concept that the ECF embraces.

A: It's about helping kids be self-sufficient, socially responsible people by the time they're 23. But it starts a lot earlier, with prenatal care for their moms. It includes getting the kids ready for preschool, helping their moms with parenting skills, helping the kids be ready to work after they're 18.

If we help them be healthy and lead less-stressful lives, we can help them succeed in school. It's hard to succeed if you're suffering from tooth decay or if it's too noisy in your apartment to sleep. Public education is part of it, yes, but kids are only in school for six hours a day.

In Evanston, we have the advantage of having Northwestern scholars who study the long-term results of early poverty and view it as a disease. The earlier you treat it, the better the results. Studies show that money invested in early childhood education for economically disadvantaged children saves society money in the long run. We were ahead of the times to look at ages 0 to 3 instead of just pre-kindergarten.

Q: Your work is never done?

A: In charity work, there's a lot of burnout because you can't reach all your goals, you answer to a lot of people and you respond to diverging perceptions of what is or should be on the agenda. I connect people and their needs with funds. There are always more connections to make. My work is never done, but I remain optimistic.

Q: How do you de-stress?

A: I play Spider Solitaire, follow the [Chicago Bulls](#), do the ellipticals at the health club.

I just went to my Cornell reunion, so I've been reconnecting with friends. At a 45th reunion, there is a different spirit. People have retired, lost their parents, some have lost their spouses. But we share the platform of experience.

Q: What's your advice for someone who sees great needs in his community and wants to get involved?

A: Look for a community foundation; that's a good place to start. Or, your public library should have a list of area nonprofits. Look for the ones that have the resources to make a difference — not just the ones with money, but also those that know how to use people and their talents.

Q: You say your father, a research chemist in Kalamazoo, Mich., had a great influence on you. What did he teach you?

A Integrity is the most important thing and no one can take that away from you. People would stop me in the street to ask if I was his daughter and tell me how much they admired him.

I grew up with neighbors pooling their efforts to do fall brush cleanup before adjourning to someone's house for sloppy Joes. In that way, my (ECF) work makes sense; people with shared convictions coming together to build resources for Evanston's future.

My father died after spending the day planting trees with a neighbor. Those trees grow strong and tall now.

Drawing inspiration

"From the Buddhists, I learned that life is a series of beginnings and endings," Sara Schastok says. "Mary Oliver says in her poem 'In Blackwater Woods' that you must 'love what is mortal; to hold it against your bones knowing your own life depends on it; and, when the time comes to let it go, to let it go.' "

Copyright © 2014, Chicago Tribune
