

DECEMBER 2017

Lakeview

NEIGHBORS

A JOURNEY TO SUCCESS:

Monona Neighbor Kristie
Schilling Shares Her Story

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AS A CHILD GROWING UP IN A LOW-INCOME HOUSEHOLD, who questioned whether she would ever be able to attend college someday, it took hard work and determination for Kristie Schilling to overcome hardships and achieve the success she has today.

Schilling moved to the Monona community about three years ago for a new career opportunity. She became Executive Director of the then Monona Chamber of Commerce, and led the way in transitioning the organization into the Monona East Side Business Alliance in February 2015 to revitalize it. Now, she says what was once a struggling organization, is officially the fastest growing chamber of commerce in the state. In 2015, the organization welcomed 64 new members, in 2016, 85 new members and so far in 2017, 68 new members.

She enjoys living in Monona where she is raising her daughter Sydney, age 8, and son Bodie, age 4. Both children attend Winnequah School. Schilling also currently serves on the Dane County Cultural Affairs Commission grant review panel, on the Monona Grove School District Community Engagement Committee, on the board of the Monona Farmers' Market, and is president of the Monona Business Watch program. She is also a volunteer with the Wisconsin Bike Fed.

A Journey to Success:

MONONA NEIGHBOR KRISTIE SCHILLING SHARES HER STORY

BY ERIN VANDER WEELE



"I didn't really know much about Monona, but after learning about the city and realizing that it was quite small geographically and nestled around the lake, it really started to feel a bit like home," she says.

Schilling grew up on Drummond Island in the Upper Peninsula of Michigan. Her mom was raised on the island because her grandpa was hired as the first ever conservation warden around 1950. Her mom dropped out of high school in 10th grade after she became pregnant and married Schilling's dad. When Schilling was one year old, her dad had left the island.

"I didn't see him much after that, but he would come and visit once a year or so," Schilling shares. "My mom worked around the clock shoveling roofs, washing dishes at restaurants, and cleaning cabins. She eventually became a cook at a restaurant and would leave for work at 7am, then return at 11pm. Needless to say, she definitely taught me work ethic."

"Those years were really tough, but they taught me so much—like simply being grateful for having food to eat and a warm place to live," she adds. "I learned to take nothing for granted."

Schilling was born in Sault Sainte Marie, Michigan (commonly referred to as the Soo) which was about a one hour trip after getting off the ferry in DeTour Village. That was the closest city to see a movie, go roller skating and shop.

"I'm Ojibway and my tribal headquarters are located in the Soo," she said. "Unfortunately, natives living on Drummond were not





treated well. There weren't any police on the island so vigilante justice was the 'law of the land.' I get my native blood from my father. He was treated terribly along with the other natives—not allowed to go in bars and constantly harassed, due to racism.”

“My sister and I were exposed to the racism as children, but when we went to school on the mainland, things got better,” she adds. “People knew how poor we were and many of them wanted to help.”

In high school, she was a high achieving student, but sports were where she really excelled. She ran track competing in the 100 and 200-meter dash, the long jump and the 400-meter relay. At one point in the late 1980s, she had numerous state records.

“I dreamt about going to college and competing, but when it came time to think about college, I recall teachers asking my friends where they were planning to go and if they had submitted their applications. Nobody ever asked me if I was planning on going to college,” she says.

She loved school and wanted to continue on, but did not see it as an option given their financial situation.

“Today, whenever I'm publicly speaking about my life and work, I always make it a point to mention how important it is to ask kids, who may not have any college graduates in their families, if they're planning to go to college,” she emphasizes. “It could spur a conversation at home that could potentially be a life changing opportunity for that individual or it could at least get them thinking that it may be possible.”

After graduating high school, she moved to Door County. She lived there for four years working at restaurants and at a greenhouse. She had just about given up hope that she would ever go to college. Eventually, Schilling met someone who convinced her she could afford to go to college if she applied for financial aid. She applied at UW-Madison and was accepted.

“That summer, I worked two full-time jobs to save for the move to Madison that would change my life and provide numerous opportunities that I would never have had,” Schilling shares.

She was a first-generation college student attending UW-Madison from 1994-1998. Schilling worked her way through college by waitressing at restaurants on the east side. She graduated with a double major BA in Geography and BA in Conservation Biology with two minors in fine art and French.

Her first trip abroad was to Hong Kong, China and Japan. She then realized how much she loves to travel and took trips all over the world.

“I hitchhiked all over New Zealand once, traveled the ring route in Iceland, and hiked a centuries old Mayan trade route in Guatemala,” she shares.

She also studied abroad in Sydney, New South Wales, Australia in 1997 at Macquarie University. While in Australia, she studied invasive species.

Each spring, she travels somewhere by herself to explore other cultures. This year she went to Oaxaca. Last year, she visited Cartagena, Colombia, South America.



Schilling started her career at a small cartography firm in Madison known as XNR Productions Inc. She was the illustrative map maker creating maps that often looked like paintings or illustrations for travel guides and atlases.

“I gained some amazing experience at XNR as one of our clients was the atlas and travel guide departments for National Geographic,” she says.

In 2000, she started her own cartography company where she started working with chambers in Wisconsin to produce their maps. After three years, she was doing a lot of graphic design work as well and the company evolved into a graphic design agency. Eventually, she added video production and sold the company in 2010.

Today, as the Executive Director of the Monona East Side Business Alliance, Schilling says she is committed to providing a different experience for members by constantly creating new programs, developing innovative ways to help businesses connect, and identifying the needs of the Monona East Side community.

As an example, the organization will launch a new program in July called Curatorial Connection, a program for artists to join MESBA so businesses can have access to a centralized directory of artists willing to rent their work to businesses.

“I know that the arts is one of the reasons we have such a high quality of life,” Schilling states. “My goal was to create a program that could help businesses enhance their brand, create a more fulfilling workplace for their employees, while putting money in the pockets of artists at the same time.”

