

Beth Fetterley Heller

Vice President of Programs, Zoological Society of Milwaukee
Member Since 2010

Talk about achieving your childhood dreams.

Beth Fetterley Heller sang before she spoke and started catching and caring for creatures, especially bugs, as soon as she could walk. Fast forward to today when she is vice president of programs for the Zoological Society of Milwaukee where she helped invigorate its arts education program for children.

Beth grew up on Milwaukee's East Side near Lake Park, where she immersed herself in nature. It was a passion nurtured and encouraged by her mother Pat, who was a nature, conservation and gardening enthusiast, and her dad, Rotarian Dan Fetterley, who taught Beth about astronomy, trees and sailing.



"My dad is an amazing astronomer, so I grew up stargazing with him. He got me excited about science. He knows how to do celestial navigation and used it to sail around the world, crossing every single ocean on a sailboat. I grew up on a sailboat, so I loved both the water and the green spaces."

Beth's older brother Will, who lives in Mequon, is a renewable energy consultant and an avid sailor.

"He was a really good brother who always looked out for me. My motto growing up was 'Me, too!' because I wanted to do everything he did. I've look up to him my whole life."

Science, music and service

Recognizing her musical inclination, Beth's parents got her involved in music early on, including piano lessons. She sang with the Florentine Opera Children's Choir and the Great Lakes Opera.

"I studied piano growing up and considered music school, but my interests were too broad to have that kind of dedication. I did keep singing because you can sing anywhere," said Beth, who has sung with the Bay Shore Lutheran Church choir, the Occasional Crooners, a folk music group, and the Milwaukee Choristers, one of Milwaukee's oldest and most popular mixed voices choruses.



Beth, who has a bachelor's degree in biology and education from Lawrence University and an MBA from UW-Milwaukee, taught biology at Appleton East High School, then transitioned into nonformal science teaching at nature and animal rehabilitation centers in New York, New Mexico and Wisconsin. She then had a 21-year stint as education and strategy director at Urban Ecology Center (UEC). About five years ago, she accepted the zoological society position.

"A lot of people who understand my love of UEC questioned the move, but I like to say that I was drawn to something, not running away. I was drawn to global conservation and world-class animal care and I'm really proud of the work there."

Along with her passion science and music, a huge part of Beth's life has been community service.

"I've been a volunteer my whole life. It was something ingrained since I was young."

However, when she got engaged to Fred Heller, she saw it as a good time to reassess and carefully consider which organization best fit her goals and values.

"I stepped away from most volunteer activity to reset my commitments. I chose Rotary because of the different perspectives, the mix of businessmen and women—I wanted a more diverse set of peers," said Beth, whose grandfather Raymond was a Rotarian, making her a third-generation member.

Q & A

Who had a big impact on your life and what lessons did they impart that have stuck with you?

My parents. They provided this wonderful balance. They have both always cared deeply about education and were themselves very educated. They instilled that passion in me.

What accomplishment are most proud of?

I feel so energized about Rotary and could not be more honored to be asked to fill this role as president. Having just come from an international conference with all the people committed to be a force for good across the world—that just feels so desperately needed. So, to have my volunteer career culminate in this space right now is pretty exciting.



What issues are you most passionate about these days?

Through and through, it's education, especially for our youth. I don't think the education system is doing the best it can to prepare our kids for the future. And the answer to that is complicated, so I pay attention and try to do the right thing when opportunities arise.

The other thing I care deeply about is dismantling structural racism. The work the Rotary Club is doing, and what organizations are trying to do to dismantle structural racism in our community, is critically important.

What do you like to do in your free time?

Hiking with my husband. We walk about five miles a day. We also love to sail and we are foodies.