

Kristine (Kris) Martinsek

Principal/Owner, Martinsek & Associates
Member Since 2006

As you wend your way across Milwaukee, you won't see Kris Martinsek's name on plaques or markers (and she's just fine with that). But she has left her imprint throughout the city in innumerable and significant ways.

Creation of the RiverWalk during her role as the city's marketing director is a prime example.

"At the time, the Milwaukee River was so polluted, with sewerage floating in it and no fish or wildlife. It was lined with vacant, contaminated lots. Many people thought developing the riverfront was a crazy idea."

Kris worked with the Milwaukee Metropolitan Sewerage District, Department of Natural Resources, legislators, city officials, environmental groups and business organizations to establish a plan to develop and promote the Milwaukee River as a tourism destination.

It took 10 years of work and planning before the first segment was even built, but eventually the 3.7-mile pedestrian walkway transformed the downtown area. Commercial and residential development flourished along the upgraded river corridor, which was also enhanced by entertainment venues and art installations.

"To see something that big progress from its inception to becoming such an important part of the city's identity was tremendous," she said.

The creation of Lakeshore State Park from deep tunnel project limestone debris; the Wisconsin Center District; the Hop streetcar; guiding the world-renowned Summerfest and ethnic festivals; and turning the abandoned flushing station into Colectivo Coffee Roasters (formerly Alterra) are some of the major projects Kris helped implement and promote in her various roles with the city.

Some achievements are less tangible, such as improved river and Lake Michigan water quality, low-income housing programs, promotion of minority- and women-owned businesses, neighborhood and commercial district revitalization and putting Milwaukee on the map as a popular convention site and tourist destination.

Through it all, what Kris loved most was the collaboration.



"I really enjoyed seeing disparate segments of the community come together for something that had a lasting impact and made Milwaukee a better place to live. Of course hundreds of people had to be on board for all of these projects to succeed and I was just a part of it. But like in the musical "Hamilton," wanting to 'be in the room where it happened,' I can say I was there."



A trailblazer in her profession, Kris was hired in the mid-1970s by the Milwaukee Brewers marketing office, the first woman in management in the male-dominated business. An unwritten rule at the time required women employees to dine in the cafeteria first, followed by all the managers (but only men). It just so happened that Henry Aaron's assistant was a Black woman, so to make a statement about equality, Henry began dining with the women. The separate cafeteria hours quietly disappeared.

"He never raised his voice. He didn't make a fuss. I learned from Henry how the actions of one person with a commitment to virtue can bring about change."

When she isn't focused on promoting, fundraising, planning and administering projects, Kris, who was born and raised in Greenfield, is a feminist and staunch defender of equality.

"Leaving my rural, sheltered, homogeneous, middle-class existence in Greenfield to attend UW–Madison during the height of the protests against the war in Vietnam was life changing. I was seeing racism, misogyny and poverty for the first time. I went to my first war protest and that was the beginning of my lifelong activism."

That so many of our rights are currently being threatened and reversed makes her furious and disheartened.

"We're having to fight for everything all over again. It feels like we're going backwards in many ways."

As a political activist, Kris is still driven to bring about change and she's hopeful that the younger generation, and especially women, will continue to fight for social justice.

"We need to stand up for what we believe in. I always come back to what Henry taught through his example: never be surprised by the power of one person's actions."

Kris has learned so much about people and cultures through her passion for travel, something she can pursue even more now that she's quasi-retired. She and Roger, her partner of 37 years, have an increased sense of urgency to see as much of the world as possible while they are still able.

Rotary is also an important part of her life. She serves on the World Services Committee and has traveled on the Guatemala service trip three times in addition to supporting the effort through her PR and marketing skills.

"As a Rotary member, I really appreciate being immersed in a huge group of people who are committed to making the community a better place—people who don't just talk but do the work."

She also enjoys the weekly speakers as a way to get unfiltered information from a variety of sources from many different arenas. And she adds, "I truly love the camaraderie."



Editor's Note: *Rotary People of Action* is a bi-monthly series written by a group of Rotarians. This feature was written by Mary Bolich.