

## Joanne Grunau

Independent Consultant and Advisor  
Rotary Member Since 1988 (RCM 2008)

As a young real estate professional in Michigan, Joanne Grunau picked up kernels of wisdom from an older colleague named Barb Lewis. Joanne has long since moved on from the U.P. and real estate, but she carried Barb's sage advice with her.

Back then, Joanne managed a RE/MAX office when a merger with a smaller company brought her and Barb together.

"Being raised in her family's bar in a remote town made Barb blunt yet perceptive. When I was hiring a sales staff, Barb noticed my preferences and said, 'You know, Joanne, we don't need a bunch of clones of you running around.' That taught me the value of working with others whose viewpoints and experiences might not match my own."

Joanne, of Detroit, learned about people by growing up fifth of 10 children. Her parents came from large families, so she was surrounded by siblings, aunts, uncles and many cousins.

"A large family is like a microcosm of the world, and being part of one allows you to learn a lot about people."



Encouraged by her parents to work hard and go to college, Joanne received a bachelor's degree in public administration (and later attended night classes for four years to earn her master's degree), then worked as a regional planner for six U.P. counties, administering grants to low-income homeowners to bring their houses up to code. Finding the pace of state government slow, she transitioned to real estate and was a broker nearly 15 years.

"Real estate was always fun and never felt like work."

Joanne determined, however, that her personality and a job that lacked definitive boundaries was not an ideal combination for family life, so she took a position at Finlandia University. There, she was tasked with turning an abandoned, contaminated building into a hybrid department for business and art and design schools, including a business incubator for artists and designers. Her budget was zero dollars.

That seven-year project illustrates a hallmark of Joanne's personality: she thrives on rebuilding dysfunctional organizations from the ground up or creating entirely new programs from scratch. And once they're up and running, she is ready to move on.

She accepted a newly created Foundation Development position at Michigan Tech University. Then, after her children Jeff and Laura left home, Joanne became Vice President of Advancement at Alverno College in Milwaukee.

After retiring in 2010, she focused her energy on volunteering for Donate Life Wisconsin (DLW), which advocates for organ, tissue and eye donation. Spurred by her penchant for building things, she soon became president, and helped build annual revenue from \$6,000 to about \$300,000. She married Gary Grunau in 2013. When he was diagnosed with a brain tumor in 2017, she stepped away from DLW. Gary passed away in late 2019.

“Life with Gary was a real adventure and we did a lot in a short period of time, both professionally and personally. His innate optimism served him well throughout his career as well as his personal life. He only saw the upside, even when he was very sick.”

Today, Joanne is passionate about the I Have a Dream Foundation – MKE. Partnering with the Milwaukee Academy of Science, the foundation is tracking 100 first-grade students, most with challenging life circumstances, for the next 16 years. Upon graduation, they will receive post-secondary scholarships. Unique to this Milwaukee cohort, their families receive housing, broadband, jobs and, under Joanne’s leadership, healthcare and wellness services.

“The path forward for Milwaukee to be a successful, thriving city is through our young people. We need to keep them safe, healthy and in school. The way to do that is to support their families so that they can provide the love and nurturing children need.”

Dedicating herself to others was instilled in childhood.

“Although my family was without a lot of means, we always had love, support and high expectations. I have always felt it was my duty to reach a hand out to those who are not as fortunate.”

Joanne found Rotary to be the ideal conduit for reaching out to make a difference in the lives of others. She is actively engaged and is a star recruiter with a personal goal of bringing in a new member for each year she has been a Rotarian. She is well on her way with 15 so far and four prospects.

“The more active I am in Rotary projects, the more I talk about it with others, many of whom are interested in joining. They are just waiting to be asked.”

Outside of volunteer commitments, Joanne enjoys outdoor activities, reading, cooking and spending time with her children and granddaughter. She also loves traveling, and if there’s a club nearby, she’ll pop into meetings and volunteer events.

“With Rotary, no matter where you are, you can just jump in and have instant friends.”

