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also

PROFILE: Margot Lemaster, an area leader for diversity and inclusion

LOCAL LIFE: The Holler, a hip, new hangout in Bentonville

EATS & DRINKS: Get cozy with cognac at Local Flavor Café in Eureka Springs
Margot Lemaster, a Fayetteville native, at Wilson Park. “I grew up a few blocks from this park and it’s where I spent a large part of my childhood on the playground, in the swimming pool, sledding on the hills in the snow and, of course, exploring the creeks,” she says. “It’s one of my favorite places.”
Destined to Create Change

Margot Lemaster seemed destined for a life of service to others. She learned by example. “I hold both of my parents in such high esteem,” Margot says. Her mother was a member of the Peace Corps in the 1960s, was active in the civil rights movement and worked in community development as a teacher and advocate for people with mental illness. Her father also served in the Peace Corps, as well as in Vietnam, and later worked in environmental law and as a law librarian. When Margot was 14, her mother passed away, but Margot says that everyone around her continued to offer support and encouragement to be her best.

Having grown up in Fayetteville, Margot gained a broad view of the world through travels to various parts of the country as well as across the globe. She explains that she comes from a long line of women and men who were fully committed and engaged in their communities. “My grandmother worked at the United Nations for a while in New York. She and my grandfather were world travelers and heavily involved in service to their community. That was something that was instilled in me for a long time,” she says. “And, I knew I wanted to help those who were most vulnerable.”

Music was another important part of her life and, for her junior and senior years of high school, she left Fayetteville to attend a boarding academy to study music. She thought she would one day become a professional musician, but she says, “It was so competitive. If you wanted to be good, you had to do it all the time. I wanted to be involved in other things, as well.” She decided to take a year off after high school and travel to Senegal, where her mother had been while in the Peace Corps. “This was about four years after I lost my mother,” Margot says.
“I met people there who knew her and I felt a connection to her while I was there.” After returning, Margot attended the University of North Carolina at Asheville.

While in college, she began exploring immigrant issues and why people choose to uproot their lives. “Immigrants never get rid of their home,” she says. “But they learn to adopt things about their new home. I met many people who were living between two worlds, and I found this so fascinating.” She also participated in as many enriching experiences as possible, like West African dance classes (which she had first learned while visiting Senegal) and hiking in the Blue Ridge Mountains.

It was during those years, however, that tragedy struck again when her father was diagnosed with Lou Gehrig’s disease. She came back to Fayetteville to help care for her father. She was 24 when he passed away. Not long before her father’s death, Margot met and started dating “a handsome architect who also loved exploring the outdoors” named Jordan Lemaster.

Margot eventually realized that graduate school was her next step. When she was 26, she headed off to the University of Oregon to do an international studies program. She did her research in Iowa, looking at how immigrants are moving to small towns all over America, as opposed to bigger cities such as New York and Chicago. When she finished in 2012, she came back to Fayetteville.

From 2013 to 2017 she worked as the executive director for the Ozark Literacy Council, a local nonprofit that serves native- and foreign-born adults to improve their English literacy skills. She was familiar with an organization called Welcoming America and wanted to create a similar program in her home region. When an opportunity came up with the Northwest Arkansas Council, which was formed in 1990 by Sam Walton, J.B. Hunt, Don Tyson, John Tyson and 30 other business leaders, she jumped at the chance.

The Northwest Arkansas Council began with the idea that area businesses would thrive with improved infrastructure. While the regional airport, highways and other transportation priorities remain important aspects of the council’s work, it also focuses on quality of life. “Social infrastructure is just as important as physical infrastructure to the future success of our region,” Margot says. “It’s important to any size business. They want to be able to attract talent from all over the world, and having people perceive Arkansas in a positive light is important in accomplishing that.”
This is the driving force behind EngageNWA. Funded by the Walmart Foundation and Tyson Foods, its purpose is “to broaden inclusion and engagement, and to strengthen the regional economy by positioning Northwest Arkansas as a community of engaged global talent.”

EngageNWA launched in 2013 as a partnership between The Jones Trust and the Northwest Arkansas Council. In addition to the founding partners, Walmart and Tyson Foods, a variety of educational, municipal, consultancy, nonprofit and business partners from throughout the region also support the work.

The program made so much sense in a region that has experienced rapid change over the last few decades. In 1990, almost 96 percent of Northwest Arkansas residents were white. Now, largely because of the region’s growing populations from outside the region, the state and across the globe, Northwest Arkansas is about 73 percent white.

In 2017, the Northwest Arkansas Council commissioned a regional strategic plan for diversity and inclusion. They determined that EngageNWA should lead the effort and hired Margot for the job. “We are identifying the problems and how to address them,” she says. “We are encouraging collaboration across sectors to leverage our strengths and make our region better for everyone who lives here. This is a four-year plan, and we are excited about seeing real change occur.”

Margot says that, through her work at EngageNWA, she is helping to unify and uplift the voice of inclusion in Northwest Arkansas. “I want to make sure that this is a living plan and that we can improve upon it. There are a lot of people from throughout the region who are committed to seeing it succeed.” And there is no doubt the Northwest Arkansas Council selected the right person for the job. Margot’s entire life has been leading her to this place where she is able to bring change to her home region.

Margot encourages anyone who wants to see our region create a community of engaged global talent to visit the EngageNWA website at engagenwa.org and click the button that says, “Get Involved.”