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Susan Lloyd's passion: Improving Milwaukee through neighborhoods

By [Georgia Pabst](#) of the Journal Sentinel
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When Susan Lloyd came to Milwaukee five years ago, she began covering the territory from the north side of the city to the south, and from east to west. She has become a familiar face.

From polished, elegant boardrooms and meetings with power brokers to playgrounds, street fairs and community meetings in low-income neighborhoods, she can be found listening and joining in the conversation.

She keeps a keen eye on issues, projects and possibilities for helping to make Milwaukee better.

It's her job. It's her career. And it's her passion.

"I love my work," she says unabashedly.

As executive director of the Zilber Family Foundation, Lloyd leads the 10-year, \$50 million Zilber Neighborhood Initiative, aimed at revitalizing some of the city's poorest neighborhoods scarred by poverty, crime, foreclosures, joblessness and low educational attainment.

"I have the best job in the world — emotionally and psychologically satisfying, intellectually stimulating," she says, sitting in her office on the eighth floor of the Empire Building downtown.

"And there's no end to the challenges."

Improving city neighborhoods has been made tougher by the recession and foreclosure crisis. But Lloyd says: "If you do this work long enough, you stick with it and plan, good work will win out."

The Zilber Neighborhood Initiative was created by the late real estate developer and philanthropist Joseph Zilber. At age 90, he decided to return much of his fortune to the city he loved.

The son of Russian Jewish immigrants, he grew up at N. 10th St. and W. Meineke Ave. above the grocery store his parents ran. He went to college, became a real estate developer and amassed great wealth.

Years later as he drove through his old neighborhood, he said, he became depressed by conditions and decided to put up \$50 million over 10 years to try to create opportunities for a new generation.

To direct the effort, he selected Lloyd, an Evanston, Ill., consultant with a doctorate from Northwestern University and a background in nonprofits. She had worked for the John D. and Catherine T. MacArthur

Foundation in Chicago and directed MacArthur's investment in New Communities, a similar program in 16 Chicago neighborhoods.

In his book "How I Built an Empire & Gave It Away," Zilber describes meeting Lloyd and the decision to hire her on the spot: "When I see someone who I think can perform, someone with the drive, the desire and the brains, I don't hesitate to bring them in."

Lloyd remembers that Zilber, who died in 2010 at age 92, was interested in results. He was especially attracted to the idea of leveraging his investment with that of others.

Old neighborhood

To start, Zilber chose his old neighborhood, now called Lindsay Heights, and the Clarke Square neighborhood on the south side. Later, Layton Boulevard West Neighbors, which concentrates on revitalizing Milwaukee's Silver City, Burnham Park and Layton Park neighborhoods, was added.

So far, the foundation has awarded \$18.2 million in grants to the neighborhood initiative and a variety of educational, economical and other community efforts. That investment has attracted \$43.1 million more in resources, Lloyd says.

Milwaukee Mayor Tom Barrett says he was thrilled when Zilber made the \$50million commitment but wondered about selecting Lloyd.

"I thought, why not bring someone who knows the territory," Barrett says. "She's from Chicago."

He soon changed his mind.

"She's a quick study," Barrett says. "She's able to work in different parts of the city effectively. And she's not historically tied to the north or south side of the city."

"She came as an honest broker. Her biggest strength is her demeanor. She's resolute without being overbearing, and she's a remarkable listener. She can bring people together."

Lloyd has brought a new way of thinking about neighborhoods and a new strategy to Milwaukee, says Barbara Notestein, executive director of Safe & Sound, an anti-crime initiative.

It's the idea of using residents and other assets in the neighborhood to work together on a quality-of-life plan to create change, she says.

"She asks excellent questions and makes us think how we can think differently," Notestein says. "She's pushing us all to do our best work and collaborate."

Helping everywhere

Ellen Gilligan, president and CEO of the Greater Milwaukee Foundation, says Lloyd is helping the overall community beyond the three Zilber neighborhoods.

Lloyd advocated forming the Community Development Funders Alliance, which consists of banks, foundations and others who can support and complement each other's work in neighborhoods, she says.

"Susan has the unique ability to work at two levels — she's engaged at the neighborhood level on a

strong day-to-day working relationship with neighborhood organizations, but also has a tremendous capacity to work at a system and strategic level, and they complement each other," Gilligan says.

Lloyd says she sees change in Milwaukee, and she's hopeful.

"Many philanthropic and nonprofits are aligning and coordinating funding, and there's more interaction with people in the neighborhoods most affected by change," she says. The recession and reduced resources have pushed many institutions to think more strategically and form partnerships, she adds.

While money is important, it's not always about the money, she says. Often, it's as much about connecting the dots — connecting resources and neighborhoods, she says.

Lloyd thrives on the diversity of her work and the people she meets. She cites one recent Friday night when she first went to North Division High School's cafeteria for the unveiling of the alumni Hall of Fame. She sits on the board of the alumni association.

Then she headed to Bacchus restaurant on the lakefront, where she sat at the bar and ordered the pear almond tart. The \$10 dessert was developed by Joe and Jennifer Bartolotta as a fundraiser to help Walnut Way Conservation Corp., which had a serious fire and was about to lose the pear crop in its orchard. Walnut Way runs the Zilber Initiative in Lindsay Heights.

MacArthur veteran

Born 60 years ago in the back seat of a Pontiac in Patterson, N.J., Lloyd is the second of five children. Her dad is from New Jersey; her mother from St. Thomas in the Virgin Islands. They met when he was stationed at a submarine base in St. Thomas.

Her father worked for Motorola in marketing, and the family moved around, including living in the Pittsburgh area, then Glen Ellyn, Ill.

After graduating from North Central College in Illinois, she taught school and worked in high school programs in various Chicago neighborhoods. For 10 years she worked with nonprofits, then went to graduate school. She spent 13 years at the MacArthur Foundation, where she became program director for community and economic development and responsible for MacArthur's investment in the New Communities program.

She also has run her own consulting firm.

"What attracted me to Milwaukee was the opportunity to work on issues that matter to me at a scale that I think great progress can be made," she says.

She says she's grown to love Milwaukee. It helps that her only son, who is 21 and in college, likes to visit Milwaukee.

Zilber's daughter, Marcy Zilber Jackson, who is president of the Zilber Family Foundation board, says she realizes change doesn't happen overnight, especially in a city where divisions are great, like Milwaukee.

But Lloyd is a great asset, she says.

"She moves through the city and relates to everyone," Jackson says. "We can say she's transforming things."

Foundation's outreach

The Joseph and Vera Zilber Family Foundation Inc., which started in 1961, is dedicated to enhancing the well-being of individuals, families and neighborhoods with a primary emphasis on the City of Milwaukee. It has pledged money to several Milwaukee programs, including:

- \$30 million to Marquette University for scholarships and other programs.
- \$10 million to the University of Wisconsin-Milwaukee to establish a School of Public Health.
- \$50 million over 10 years to improve Milwaukee neighborhoods.

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