

An educator with an encore

Deanna Zilske

BY DAVID WALSH / PHOTO BY BILL GNADE

Deanna Zilske wears many hats. Principal, education coach, director and theater instructor are only some of her responsibilities, usually on the same day.

“Often times I leave the house at five a.m., and do not return home until after 11 p.m.,” says Zilske matter-of-factly.

Zilske, 36, is currently the Instructional Coach and Principal at the Wells Memorial School in Harrisville, where she has worked for two years. Before, she worked in the education department of Stage One Theater in Louisville, and at an elementary school in Brooklyn, while earning her Masters from Pace University. She can now add Business Monadnock Trendsetter to her resume.

Zilske is married to Steven Cady, a professional musician and Performing Arts Chair at Vermont Academy. They have a 3-year-old cat named Ender.

For Zilske there is nothing more exciting than working with like-minded, motivated people.

“Surrounding yourself with people who inspire you and can talk openly about whatever your objective is. That is what moves the world forward and how positive change is created in the world,” she says.

All of Zilske’s travels and adventures have circled back to the Keene area, where she has found those motivated people and established roots in several education systems as well as the community at large.

“As an adult I fell back in love with the area. People deeply care, with no request for anything in return,” she says. “The way that (people in) the Monadnock region support each other is something that I never realized as a young person growing up in the area. But as an adult I found it really inspiring. I didn’t want to move to a place that didn’t have that.”



Zilske’s path to education was shaped at a young age by her parents, predominately by her early initiation into the arts. After being introduced by her parents to music and theater, Zilske went on to earn her bachelor’s degree in theater, with a focus in theater for youth, at Whittenberg University in Ohio.

Through her teaching experiences, Zilske has adopted a student-focused education philosophy.

“Children are children, and at the heart of every child is a desire to be understood and to be cared for and to help grow,” she says.

As an instructional coach, Zilske spends most of her time in classrooms and working alongside teachers to enhance the students’ experience at Wells Memorial.

“It is a collaborative experience and a wonderful opportunity as well as being beneficial to the students and staff,” says Zilske. “I have been incredibly lucky and grateful for the staff I have had the privilege to work with. The staff here at Harrisville is one of the most amazing, passionate, intelligent, insightful people.”

In her administrative role, as well as outside of school, Zilske realizes the importance

ZILSKE CONTINUED ON PAGE 47

of working as a team. The first step to building a successful team is listening to all players. "In everything we do in life there is always a team. I have learned to listen to every member of that team and say what can we do to help move this forward," she says. "I learned how to listen; I think I was so young when I went into it that one of the major things I learned was how to really listen to students, staff, and families. Families are so vitally important."

Aside from her roles at Wells Memorial School, Zilske is active in theater and music communities in Keene. While earning her undergraduate degree in musical theater from Whittenberg, Zilske developed a passion for directing. She has moved from performing in the Lions Club yearly production to directing it. This year the cast and crew of volunteers performed Cinderella over Valentine's Day weekend. Zilske says she began acting in the yearly Lion's Club production in the sixth grade alongside her mother.

The Lion's Club production is the product of more than 100 community members donating their time and talents according to Zilske.

"That's rare," she exclaims. "We live in a community that says 'Yes, I want to spend hundreds of hours of my life putting on a musical as a gift to the community.' That feeds me.

"Music is always such a deep part of my life, and it continues to be. To me it's an essential part of being human. It hits home; when people don't have words there is music," says Zilske.

Her passion for music and performance has combined with education at MoCo Arts in Keene. She assists and instructs in the Creative Arts of Keene (CAKE) program at MoCo, for 75 to 100 students ranging in age from seven to 18 each week of the summer.

Several of the CAKE students and graduates move on to work with Zilske again when she directs the yearly Keene High School musical.

"We have an amazing group of talented students in this area," Zilske says.

Zilske is motivated by the abundance of hard-working and creative individuals who surround her.

"When I look at people who audition for the Lions Club Show and MoCo and Keene High School, we are an artistic hot bed," says

Zilske, "We have professional level artists all over this region. Family brought me back, and this kept me here."

This wealth of local talent is something Zilske believes is quite unique to the Monadnock area. While the passionate artists and educators attracted Zilske to the area, she believes there are prospects for all interests looming in area towns and cities.

"I think there are so many opportunities for young people to become involved in so many different things," Zilske explains. "If you are interested in business, there is opportunity for that. We have places like Hannah Grimes that will support grassroots businesses. If you are involved in the arts, there are several arts organizations that support artists both professionally and non-professionally. There are businesses like Badger that are based in environmental study and making sure we are taking care of the world around us. There is also a high level of support and people take care of one another here."

At the end of her long days, Zilske says this of arriving home long:

"It's fun! I have an awesome life and I am so incredibly lucky!" ■



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