



SOUTH CHARLOTTE

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Charlotte's Junior Achievement leader Cherne calls journey in nonprofits a divine gift

BY ALLISON FUTTERMAN
Correspondent

Having a career in the nonprofit sector was not in Sarah Cherne's plans.

She was living in Tampa, Fla., in her last semester of graduate school, and planning to work in federal law enforcement.

To pay her way through school, she worked seven days a week at several jobs. One day at her job as a waitress, she struck up a conversation with a customer. They started discussing community issues and realized they shared similar concerns.

She must have made an impact on him, because he told her right then he was going to hire her when she finished school, according to Cherne. She called him as soon as she graduated, and he not only remembered her but told her, "Your desk is waiting."

It turns out that customer was the head of the local Big Brothers, Big Sisters.

With that, Cherne's tireless nonprofit work began. "It found me," she says of the start to her career.

She worked her way up, starting as a caseworker, learning the ropes and moving up to positions of increasing responsibility within the organization.

After she got married and became a mother, the family moved to New England, where Cherne had grown up, and she stayed home for a few years with her two sons, now 13 and 15.

Then a new position called to her, and she went to work for The American Red Cross, soon becoming the executive director of their Great Bay Chapter in New Hampshire.

At the beginning of 2008, Cherne and her family moved to Charlotte so she could take a job as CEO of Big Brothers Big Sisters of Greater Charlotte, once again finding herself led to a job she hadn't pursued.

When Cherne heard about the Charlotte position, she sent her resume but didn't expect anything to come of it. Within a few weeks, she was contacted, invited for an interview and offered the job. Before she knew it, her family was planning a move to Charlotte.

"My path has been guided," she said. A woman of faith, Cherne said she does not see her journey as the result of chance or luck. "While some some may call it coincidental, I call it divine," she said.

Big Brothers Big Sisters of Greater Charlotte was going through a challenging time when Cherne arrived.



When Cherne left the organization, she decided not to look for another position right away, and instead spent her time and energy volunteering at her children's schools. Cherne and her family live in the Olde Providence area.

Cherne also began volunteering in local political campaigns, which led to her interest in running for office.

"I wanted to serve my community at a different level," she says. She ran in the Republican primary for the District 5 seat on the Mecklenburg County Board of Commissioners. The close race was won by Matthew Ridenhour.

Cherne considers the experience one of the best of her life. "It made me fall in love with this community even more. I met so many people, and it was an awesome opportunity to listen to people's concerns."

Cherne prides herself on being a problem-solver. Her skills impressed the nonprofit organization Junior Achievement of Central Carolinas; she was chosen in summer 2012 from more than 290 applicants to be president and CEO.

The mission of Junior Achievement of Central Carolinas is to teach financial self-sufficiency. This includes teaching fiscal responsibility, entrepreneurship and work-readiness skills to more than 33,000 students a year.

Students in kindergarten through 12th grade from Charlotte-Mecklenburg Schools and surrounding districts take part in 22 programs taught by volunteers from the corporate community.

It's a mission about which Cherne is enthusiastic. "Every future leader is in K-12, the next president, the next CEO," she said. "Everybody wants to know how to be successful, whether they're from south Charlotte or from an economically challenged community."

She said the programs help young people "identify and grow their strengths and manage their weaknesses." She cites "an amazing board and dedicated staff that allow me to focus on possibilities."

Strategic leadership and forward-thinking vision is Cherne's sweet spot. "I live in world of possibilities. It's where I do my best work," she said.

Cherne regularly speaks to business groups and women's groups. A common topic is ethical leadership, which is important to her. She believes success and integrity can and should coexist.

Allison Futterman is a freelance writer. Have a story idea for Allison? Email heraliwrites10@gmail.com.

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