

THE LITTLE GENERAL

Sue Black's outspoken, supercharged style led to her getting dumped as state parks director. Can she succeed in running Milwaukee County's badly underfunded parks?

by Susan Nusser

As soon as State Parks Director Sue Black walked into the office that day, she knew something wasn't quite right. "It was weird. It was tense, the air was still, and I thought something bad had happened to someone."

She had rushed back from the Ancora Coffee shop off Capital Square in Madison to arrive on time for her meeting with the administrators at the Department of Natural Resources to whom she reported. They handed her a letter and watched her read that she was relieved of her position. It was a job she loved, one she'd wanted ever since her student days at the University of Wisconsin-Madison, one she'd locked into her sights and aimed at through years of other parks and recreation jobs. Now they were taking it away. She was being shifted to some administrative position whose title she can't remember to this day.

Black may have pushed too hard for her vision, may have ruffled feathers within the bureaucracy. "I still don't know who pulled the trigger on me," she says.

And now she would pay the price. "Initially, she was devastated," says Ann Mahnke, her friend of 25 years, "but that gave her more strength in the end than anyone thought possible."

When Milwaukee County Executive Scott Walker called to offer Black a position as his parks director, despite her devastation and the ignominy of a desk job, Black turned him down not once but several times. That's how bad the situation was in Milwaukee, where parks funding has been declining for 25 years. Precisely because the situation was so dire, Walker

had to have her. He and his family had camped in the state parks over the years that Black was director, and he noticed the changes. "She took them to a new level of excellence," says Walker, and getting Black would give him a "true-blooded professional" to champion a parks system at its lowest point in history.

At the time, she was being courted by the state of California, but Mahnke believes Black's heart is in her native Wisconsin. Prodded by her mentors, the late Democrat and former Sen. Gaylord Nelson and former Republican Gov. Tommy Thompson, she agreed to take the job.

And so this ever-outspoken agent of change is now ruffling feathers in Milwaukee. Most see Black as a dynamic leader who is revitalizing an imperiled parks system. But that may not be enough to save the system. Walker is pushing to create an independent parks district with separate tax funding. Many county supervisors, meanwhile, prefer to retain control and use a county or regional sales tax to fund operations. But under either scenario, Black would be the parks leader, everyone seems to agree.

Black, in short, has quickly become the hope of all who care about the parks. She sees herself in the tradition of Charles Whitnall and Frederick Law Olmsted, with a mission not just to maintain the parks but to improve them, expand them and educate children so that generations from now, her parks will still be loved and protected. It's a grand vision for a county with a fabulous history, with far more parkland per capita than in most metro areas. But will Black achieve her vision or suffer another defeat as she did in state government?

The youngest of four children, Black, now 44, grew up loving the outdoors, first in Brookfield and then, after her family moved, in Fond du Lac. "At the parks, there were people and there were friends,"

she remembers. There was also her horse Whisky, who she took to camp with her. There was Capture the Flag, shinnying up trees, bonfires and even singing. "We rode our bikes down [to the parks], and there was softball and arts and crafts, all that stuff."

When Black was in her teens, her parents' marriage ended in divorce and her mother remarried. The park was a refuge for her. "Everybody else in my family was busy with their life, and I guess I just had to make a life for myself," Black recalls.

Along with a spirit of independence, Black's family also passed on their ambitions. "My dad always said, 'You want to sell diamonds or do you want to sell Bic



Photograph: Peter DiAntoni

Profile

pens, honey? Hang out where the money is.” Her grandmother owned a beauty shop, her stepfather man-

ufactured brooms, so Black inherited an entrepreneurial streak as well. It was her family who insisted she attend UW-Madison instead of La Crosse, her first choice, because they wanted her at a Big Ten school. Fortuitously for Black, that’s where she first met the state parks director at the time, Dave Weizenicker, and began to see her future.

“Swear to God, when people hire me, they know what they’re getting.”

It was also while she was at Madison, in 1981, that her stepfather and then her mother died. “I remember coming home from college one March day and she was crying on the edge of the bed. She told me she was sick and it was lung cancer, and sure enough, by August she was dead.”

After graduating, Black moved from parks and recreation director positions at Green Lake and then Portage to a brief stint as recreation director of the Oak Hill Correctional Facility in Oregon, Wisconsin. She developed a sideline selling zip-up beer coolers (“I think I’d be awesome at sales,” she says) until she was hired as operations manager for the Dane County Park System. By the end of that decade, first her father and then her grandmother died. Black can’t quite recall the dates of those deaths, consigning them to the murk of what she calls “a real icky time.”

Narrating her life – from the beer cooler job to the family deaths – Black ends each episode with a philosophical shrug, saying she learned a lot. She describes herself as having a strong faith, though not a religion: “I believe the whole higher power is watching out for me, and wherever I’m at, I’m supposed to be there right then.”

Black continued her rise in the parks and recreational field, going from Dane County to chief of operations for the Arizona State Parks. Still, she kept her eye on the Wisconsin state job. She’d wanted it so much, says Mahnke, that she “willed it to happen.”

It was George Meyer, then secretary of



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the DNR, who hired Black as his parks director in 1997. She was an energetic, effective manager, Meyer says, drawing the support of state legislators to a parks system that had been neglected. She was entrepreneurial – attracting private funding to the parks and increasing the numbers of friends groups. She added trails to the system, and her innovations made her popular with influential observers like Gaylord Nelson and Tommy Thompson. The latter calls her “the best parks director in the country.”

But, says Meyer, she may have moved too fast for some in the state bureaucracy: “She had trouble with some people who were resistant to change and resented her ability to accomplish what she could accomplish,” he says. After her champion, Meyer, resigned as DNR head and Jim Doyle took over as governor, Black, with her close relationship to Thompson, was easy to get rid of.

Yet Black says her 2003 demotion “was for the best,” with no apparent bitterness. This absence of rancor, the disinclination to settle scores is notable in the world of politics, but Black’s focus is on her great love of the parks. That single-mindedness can both inspire some and annoy others.

Milwaukee County Treasurer Daniel

Diliberti has rarely encountered anyone so frank as Sue Black. At her confirmation hearings, Diliberti asked Black what she would do if Walker asked her to cut her budget. Black first glanced at Walker, then turned back to Diliberti. “Mr. Walker knows I’m an advocate for the parks,” Diliberti remembers her saying, “and I will do what’s best for them.” Recounting the story, Diliberti jerks backward with eyebrows arched, as if still feeling that blast of fresh air from Black. Typically, he notes, any appointee will quickly say, “The county executive hired me. I’ll do what he asks.”

Too many government appointees are more interested in keeping their jobs than in doing them, Black complains. But her frankness, some say, is more strategic than it might appear. Jim Goulee, former assistant parks director and now head of the nonprofit The Park People, believes that Black is 10 to 20 steps ahead of everyone else. She’s already measured the impact of her pronouncements before speaking, already run through all of the permutations of how they might be received and how she will then respond. County Supervisor Lynne De Bruin, chair of the Parks Committee, says candor is Black’s secret weap-

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on. "Honesty works," she says, "even in government."

Black puts it this way: "Swear to God, when people hire me, they know what they're getting. They know what I'm about. *I* know what I'm about." Certainly, Walker knows what she's about. "There are certain managers we go to to make up budget shortfalls," he says. "Sue's not the first on the list."

Still, Black argues that her department is being undermined by a shrinking budget. In 1980, the budget for the 15,000-acre parks system represented 48 percent of the tax levy, or about \$26 million. It's down to about 7 percent now, only \$18.4 million or just \$47 per resident. By comparison, Minneapolis residents pay \$143 each for a much smaller 5,300-acre system, and Chicago residents pay \$163 to maintain their 12,000 acres.

Without a dedicated funding source, the parks have to compete with other non-negotiable expenses, like the courts and social services, which means the parks budget is completely unstable, derived from what's left over. Because of this, Black doesn't know if the worst is behind her or yet to come. "If this weren't home," she says in frustration, "I'd have gotten out of here a long time ago."

Threatening to quit has been a favorite gambit of Black's since last spring, when Walker publicly threatened her job, but that may have been a ploy by Walker as well. Black has drawn more public and media attention to the parks, and that makes Walker very happy. And she loves the parks too much to quit. "I grew up here, and I can't ditch this team and the people who live here, who supported me," she says.

Black demonstrates that commitment by demanding accountability from everyone. When she was first hired, she asked her managers to explain why they did things the way they do. "The answer was always, 'This is the way we've always done them,'" Goulee recalls with a chuckle. "That's the wrong thing to say to Sue Black."

Ken LePine, who hired Black as a "change agent" for Dane County's parks, said she was challenged by the unionized department of "good old boys" that had never had a woman supervisor. She won them over by respecting and listening to them. "I'm not here to tell some guy who's been operating a piece of equipment for 25 years how to do it. I'm here to get him what he needs to do his job," says Black.

In Milwaukee, Black has the best relationship with the unions De Bruin has ever seen. "The union has worked hard with her to get the work done," she says, "despite the union rules, despite the bureaucracy."

Her laser-beam focus on the parks mission has a way of overcoming potential squabbles. Wasting no energy on maligning others, Black has created a positive environment in her department.

She has a way of convincing a listener you're in this together. She leans forward, gazing at her questioner with bright blue eyes and declares, "That's what I'm talking about," as if she'd been trying to come up with that explanation for weeks, and just for you. She spreads her hands, shrugs, presses her lips together, and her gestures generate a sense of camaraderie. You understand me, they say. We think alike.

"She's a schemer," says Steve Thompson, head of the Wisconsin Park and Recreation Association, "but in a good way." It works perhaps because she seems so sincere and unsecretive. She's been out about her gay sexuality "forever," she says, and doesn't understand why anyone would remain closeted. She doesn't have children to support and believes that not being tied to a salary, trusting that God has a plan for her and knowing she'll always end up okay is why her integrity remains intact.

Getting along well with everyone, Walker believes, is Black's biggest attribute. "Even though she's big buddies with Tommy Thompson," he says, "she's no Republican." As soon as he says that, though, Walker backpedals. He doesn't actually know what she is, he confesses, but she doesn't *seem* Republican.

On a muggy, overcast July morning, Black has gathered her staff in the parking lot of their offices at the old Milwaukee County Home for Dependent Children. Black is not a giant of a woman. Almost her entire staff is taller than she is, and when they gather around to confer, she disappears like a quarterback in a huddle. When they break away, you half-expect to hear them clap and yell, "Go team."

Trim, athletic, with close-cropped gray hair, Black exudes a palpable charisma. She has invited representatives of Segway of Milwaukee to demonstrate their scooters today. Black is thinking of offering Segway tours of the parks and is the first person to try a scooter. She balances easily and whirs across the parking lot. Spotting two workers about to get into a truck, she scooters over to them, showing

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off her skill at backing up and pivoting, then whirs back to her staff, who all get their own turns, laughingly unsteady on the two-wheelers. Though she has someone waiting in her office, Black stays to watch everyone in the group get their turn.

"Every now and then," says De Bruin, "You meet phenomenally good department heads, and their department just hums."

The parks department building seems like a happy place. In her short tenure, Black and her team have fixed morale, quadrupled the number of "friends" groups providing donations and volunteer help, solicited corporate sponsorship and linked up educational, volunteer and work programs that, in Black's vision, will attract parks lovers and workers for generations to come. "How cool is that?" she asks with a ready grin.

Black has also managed to acquire 200 more acres in parkland, though she's not sure she wants to reveal this because people might question her judgment. After all, there is far too little money to operate the existing parks and almost no money for the maintenance that has been deferred for almost 20 years, leading to widespread decay: closed pools, broken plumbing, mothballed buildings, weedy and overgrown lagoons and torn-up pathways.

Black's passion for the parks will go nowhere if the county can't find a long-term, dedicated source of funding. Walker and The Park People want to create a separate parks district with its own elected officials who have the power to levy taxes. But the plan's critics, like De Bruin and Diliberti, say it creates another, unnecessary layer of government and doesn't alleviate the property tax burden. They favor a five-county sales tax that would shift the burden off of the property tax and distribute the parks' cost among the residents of Milwaukee, Waukesha, Ozaukee, Racine and Washington counties. But will those outside Milwaukee approve such a tax?

Some who favor a separate district note the chargebacks for county services the parks must pay: charges for technical support, fleet maintenance, risk management, building maintenance, fire protection, highway maintenance and so on. According to parks department Finance Director Jim Keegan, this adds \$2.88 onto every dollar spent on labor and benefits. Maintaining its fleet of vehicles,

for instance, costs the parks department \$250,000 a year, almost 60 percent of which is overhead.

“Could I get a better deal on the street?” Keegan asks. “Yes.”

Some of the chargebacks are abated by tax levy, but that still leaves more than \$6 million in extra costs for the department so far this year.

Everybody wants to save the parks, says De Bruin. But they must reach a consensus, build political support for a solution, then keep their word and stand by it, something county supervisors have had trouble doing in the past. “If we can’t get our act together for the parks system,” says De Bruin, “then we should all be thrown out of office.”

On Sue Black’s 25th birthday, her father gave her a long letter telling the story of her life. “Oh, my gosh,” she says. “It was the best.” Over the years, as both her mother and father died, the letter, still so hard for her to read, has become all the more important. It is her father’s legacy to her.

Black’s current job provides a chance for her to leave her own legacy, her own letter to Milwaukee’s future citizens. But she doesn’t assume that’s a certainty. “I don’t count on tomorrow in any of these jobs because the last one was pulled away so quickly,” she says.

But if it doesn’t work out in Milwaukee, friend Ann Mahnke believes, Black will succeed elsewhere. Black has a unique ability to convert negatives into positives, a wonderful way of “winning the hearts of people,” says Mahnke.

“She’s going to accomplish great things for a parks system somewhere,” says her old boss, George Meyer. “I hope it’s Milwaukee County.”

Black does, too. But if not here, she knows she will be a parks steward somewhere, protecting and preserving open space for future generations. If its local leaders can’t agree on a long-term financial solution for the parks, then maybe Milwaukee County, like Dane County and Arizona and the Wisconsin DNR, will become another place where she’s left her “little footprints” and where she’ll be missed. Would she like to be director of the National Park Service? “Actually,” Black laughs, “I’d want to be Secretary of the Interior.” ■

Susan Nusser is a freelance writer and English professor at Carroll College. Her last feature, “Man Bites Dog,” about the politics of pit bulls, ran in the August issue.

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