

She found her ‘dream job’

Penni Klein says she loves her job as Public Lands Manager for the City of Middleton.

Enthusiasm for her work radiates from Penni Klein (B.S. 1984). “I love my job and the City of Middleton!” she proclaims. For the past five years, Penni has been Public Lands Manager for the City of Middleton, Wisconsin. Her responsibilities are as varied as the day is long and include supervising 15 full- and part-time staff and managing an annual operating budget of more than \$750,000 and a capital budget in excess of \$1 million. In addition to the paid employees, she oversees more than 400 volunteers who put in over 5,000 hours a year. Penni staffs two city committees—the Park, Recreation and Forestry Committee and the Conservancy Lands Committee—and reports on their activities monthly at the City Council meeting. She prepares, coordinates, and implements grants to create new programs, fund projects, and acquire properties for both parks and conservancy areas.

“I like the fact that I was the first Public Lands Manager for Middleton and was able to be creative in how I set up programs and projects to maximize our small staffing levels, yet improve areas quickly enough for everyone to see the benefits that changes can bring,” says Penni. It’s obvious that Penni works very hard at her job, but at the same time she says she likes the diverse staff and believes the departments all work together very well making for an enjoyable work environment.

If you are a student reading this, don’t be intimidated by Penni’s responsibilities. To reach the point where you might feel comfortable in this position, Penni offers lots of advice, most of it revolving around work experience, education, and networking. Penni credits her advisors, Prof. Robert Ray and Prof. Karla Henderson, for encouraging her to become involved in the Wisconsin Parks and Recreation Association (WPRA),

the student branch of the WPRA, and the Forestry Club. She says taking on leadership roles in these organizations provided a good opportunity to develop her leadership skills, while the organizations made it easy to develop a field-based networking system that continues to this day. “Long-term relationships were forged in these organizations that for the next 20 years have helped me in many ways to do what I do best,”

explains Penni. She also credits Profs. Don Field and Ray Guries for continuing to encourage a link between her work and UW students.

Penni gives high marks to her UW coursework that was very hands on, utilizing field trips, work experiences, and volunteer assignments in forestry, recreation, wildlife, and environmental studies. Opportunities to meet and work with professionals provided even more job networking opportunities.

Perhaps Penni is most adamant about students obtaining relevant work experience. “Never take a summer job that can’t be related to your degree or where you want to end up working,” suggests Penni. She recommends that students, “Move around and get varied experiences...and have fun! Imagine all the cool places you

can work for a summer and then go there and do it!” Penni mentions that the City of Middleton hires students for seasonal park and conservancy work, a good way to experience first-hand what it takes to operate an urban park system.

Lastly, Penni suggests that students latch onto a couple of good professional mentors. This could be an academic advisor, a boss, or another professional who is supportive and can help guide you to where you want to go. With hard work and perhaps a little luck, you may, like Penni, end up in a position that is a perfect match for your skills and interests.

Penni Klein greets State Senator Fred Risser, who is about to hike on a new trail in the Pheasant Branch Conservancy.

