

# LESLIE SGRO

By Carey Smith

"I've always tried to give to others all the positive things that I have received," says Leslie Sgro of her life's mission.

Sgro calls herself doubly blessed: first, by being raised in a tightknit and loving family, then marrying into the same kind of family. All the love, care and support she has received through the years, she puts into her service to her community.

Born near Washington, D.C., in Bethesda, Maryland, Sgro was first influenced by her mother, "who very modestly and quietly broke down barriers" by attending business school and law school, working with Ralph Nader's anti-trust group, then becoming a commercial real estate developer.

After attending graduate school, Sgro moved with her husband, Greg, back to his hometown of Springfield. It did not take long for her to "find a dynamic group of wonderful women who were definitely mentors to me as a group, and helped me," said Sgro. That left a lasting impression on Sgro who says she feels "very strongly that we should all help each other. We have to pass that on."

Sgro has been president of the Springfield Park District board of trustees since 1991. "I look at how much we've been able to accomplish and help change recreation as the need for that change has emerged. We're a dynamic and fluid organization. I'm very proud of that. As people have come to us with things they'd like to see in the community, we've been responsive."

Sheila Stocks-Smith, who nominated Sgro for this award, adds that during Sgro's tenure, Springfield has seen "a new ice rink, education buildings, a zoo building, a botanical gardens building and new infrastructure, systems and equipment throughout the park district. She has overseen a changing district, adding the first-ever park completely designed for citizens of all abilities, with a LEED platinum-certified building (LEED certification is a globally recognized symbol of sustainability achievement and leadership). Thanks to Leslie's strong leadership, we have new dog parks, accessible playgrounds, Frisbee golf, a second sheet of ice at the Nelson Center, skate parks, splash pads and much more.

"Recently she has championed, and received, a grant for a \$1 million project for Comer Cox Park in east Springfield and submitted a funding request to significantly improve Kiwanis Park for the hundreds of families residing in nearby apartments. She has literally given 30 years of her time to building a first-class park system available to every resident in and visitors to Springfield. It is important to note that Leslie receives no salary or compensation of any

kind for her service to the Park District," says Stocks-Smith.

For Sgro, the effort is worth it when she sees the results of her work. "When I go out there and see families enjoy it, kids playing there, people having events that may not otherwise be able to, I get an enormous sense of satisfaction. I helped with that. I don't think I did it – it's a team effort. We have a great board, terrific staff, a community that believes in us. I have made my community a little better place to live, a neighborhood a better place to live."

Sgro's accomplishments are not limited to the Park District. She is a regular volunteer with St. Martin de Porres Center, an organization which provides food and clothing to those in need. Sgro is gearing up for a capital campaign to renovate the existing structure, as well as build a storage unit behind it. Sgro says she has faith the campaign will succeed. "Springfield is an incredibly generous community. I've always been struck by that," she notes.

When the pandemic began, demand on places like St. Martin's rose dramatically. It was then that Sgro got involved in the micropantry scene, spearheaded by Lynn Ehmen. "I recognize a good idea when I see it. It struck a chord with me that this needed to happen," says Sgro, who is part of the support group of volunteers filling micropantries with food and toiletries on a regular basis.

"Helping was expected when I was growing up," states Sgro. "You were expected to do something to make a difference. Nobody told you what to do, but it was expected. I told my kids, we should all try to make the world a little better. We can't do it all, it's overwhelming. Pick what brings you joy, whether medicine, politics, helping people, educating people – there are so many areas of need. But you have to do something. If we all do a little something in our area, great good happens.

"I hope that I've made a difference, and made other peoples' lives a bit better. And that, to me, is plenty. That's a good legacy."





# EMILY LEWIS

By Holly A. Whisler

At eight years of age, Emily Lewis showed up at school each day prepared for the moment someone might ask her about one of her three business plans, which is why she kept them in her back pocket. At home, she had vision boards that further illustrated her dreams of owning businesses where she would feed people, and one of those businesses would be dedicated to the enjoyment of ice cream.

Did this first grader have a business? Of course – the Flamingo Cafe in Athens. Lewis smiles as she recounts her first cafe located ever-so-conveniently in the home where she grew up. At the Flamingo, she served what every 8-year-old craves – chicken nuggets, pizza and macaroni and cheese. Her dad was the graphic designer for the pretend cafe owner and his job was to type the menu. Her father asked his young daughter if this was something she wanted to do when she got older. She answered without hesitation, as she already had a burning desire to do just that – to feed people.

As years went by, Lewis said visions of the future changed from what seemed to be corny to something more refined. While in high school, her father encouraged her consider a career that would provide stability, and she decided to become a doctor. Once her career path was declared, the focus for the remainder of high school was preparing specifically for college, no other options or avenues were discussed.

Lewis went to college and majored in biology. She was attending class and doing her best, but wasn't excited or passionate about her future career. "I was going the safe route," said Lewis. It wasn't exciting, not like the dream of owning a bakery, cafe or an ice cream shop. Careers in hospitality require a great deal of work and could be considered less predictable and less stable, but to Lewis they are exciting and provoke passion. and she had no doubt she could accomplish such a dream.

Fortunately, while in college Lewis met Tim, the man who would become her husband. He knew she could do it, and they decided to accomplish the dream together. They had an unwavering faith that they would do whatever it took to ensure this dream succeeded.

Lewis admits she left college against her father's wishes, but she felt God was leading her to this dream, that this was His plan for her life. She would feed people delicious food and He would feed them the sustenance they truly needed.

"My faith is important to me. It's at the heart of everything I do. Even if things get tough, I know something good is coming from it, and I will praise Him through the storm," said Lewis. "My favorite

part about the business of feeding people is the good work that goes on behind it. If money wasn't a necessity, people I would feed for free."

comes first and balance happens because she and Tim are in it together. They take turns being either the primary parent or the primary business partner and the children go wherever she and Tim need to go.

Lewis said, "Tim and I know how to perform every position within each business so if a staff person cannot come in, one of us can perform that function." She admits that when two people at two different locations need to be gone at the same time that it can be a little cumbersome, but it's the way they planned it, and it's working for them.

Lewis said her age usually catches people off guard, especially when she's asked by a customer if they can speak to a manager and she offers to help. She has accomplished a great deal at a young age, and if she could offer advice to young people, she would acknowledge that there is a heavy emphasis on going to college, often to the exclusion of the trades, including culinary arts.

"Baking is a trade," said Lewis. She encourages young people to explore what speaks to them and to consider all options of education and training.

Lewis said, "Let the expectations go, take the pressure off and you'll find what you enjoy. When you find joy in your job and it's something you're

Lewis and her husband co-own and operate Three Twigs Bakery, Biscuits & Brunch and The Salted Lemon Market & Creamery. If three businesses aren't enough, she and Tim wanted to start their family young, and that's what they did. They now have a 5-month-old daughter, Elmah, and a 2-year-old daughter, Esther. She says that family

passionate about, you'll find ways to financially secure yourself, and you will be happy. This life is too short for regrets."





# SAMMI MANDER

By Karen Ackerman Witter

Sammi Mander was born and raised in India and has made Springfield her home since 2005. She has dedicated her life to giving back to the community where she lives, as well as her home country, drawing inspiration from her family heritage. Mander is past president of the Asian Indian Women's Organization and a longtime leader in the organization which has donated hundreds of thousands of dollars to local charities.

India Night is the most prominent activity of the AIWO. The event generates substantial funds while also raising awareness of Indian culture. Mander has chaired the gala multiple times, raising over \$315,000 for Ronald McDonald House Charities, HSHS St. John's Hospital's Neonatal ICU renovation and M.E.R.C.Y. Communities.

The biennial gala was cancelled during the pandemic. Nevertheless, due to Mander and her colleagues' leadership, the AIWO raised more than \$40,000 for The Outlet, which provides mentoring and counseling programs for at-risk youth from fatherless homes. This funding helped The Outlet address the problem of food insecurity among families and ensure students had access to updated audiovisual technology for online learning. The AIWO also helped the community during the pandemic by sewing face masks, donating over 220 to Hospital Sisters Mission Outreach and the Mississippi River Valley Blood Center.

In 2021, the surge in COVID cases in India led to an acute shortage of oxygen supply units and basic medical supplies. Mander rallied the Springfield community and led a joint effort by the AIWO, India Association of Greater Springfield and the Hindu Temple of Greater Springfield in partnership with Hospital Sisters Mission Outreach to raise funds and dispatch much-needed medical resources to rural and tribal areas in India. This "Breath for India" campaign generated over \$140,000, delivering essential oxygen equipment, PPE, home care kits and self-monitoring devices such as oximeters to the poorest and most under-resourced areas of India.

Mander is a former marketing executive and public relations professional, having served as a communication manager for Nike's licensee in India, among other positions. She applies this expertise in all of her volunteer service. In addition to her leadership role with the AIWO, Mander has been an active community volunteer with other organizations for many years. She was vice president and a board member of the Iles Elementary School PTO, raised \$50,000 for the American Diabetes Association in 2016 through the Kiss a Pig campaign and served on the Kidzeum of Health and Science Board of Directors. She also led a fundraising effort to benefit the America Nepal Medical Foundation's aid to earthquake victims in Nepalese villages.

Mander is a member of the advisory council for the Community Foundation for the Land of Lincoln and plays a leadership role with the Women for Women giving circle. She is a member of the steering committee and also chairs the grants committee. In this capacity, she helps lead a thoughtful and deliberative process to review applications and determine which worthy organizations will receive grants from the Women's Fund. Mander also serves as an ambassador of the Hope Institute, serving as an advocate and voice for children with developmental disabilities.

In 2020, Mander hosted HSHS St. John's Children's Hospital's first gala night, 'Miracule,' which was attended by over 500 of Springfield's medical specialists. The purpose of the event was to recognize hospital heroes and the families of pediatric patients who had been impacted by these medical specialists.

Her nominee wrote, "A first-generation immigrant, Mander has embraced our community and taken advantage of every opportunity to help and serve. Drawing upon her experience as a marketing executive, she has used her skill sets to focus on helping those in need by reaching and engaging diverse stakeholders, helping them empathize and drawing their support for various causes. Being a strong social justice advocate, she has devoted endless hours, used her expertise and passionate voice to bring people together and affect change, one cause at a time."

"Finding a purpose bigger than oneself and walking alongside people who have the heart to love, care and give of themselves, is an experience like no other," says Mander. "To think about the many causes being championed and just as many that have yet to find a voice, is to be open to opportunity where one can be a doer, a problem-solver and an investor in the larger good. That to me is a life well-lived, and a legacy worth passing on."





# DR. WENDI WILLS EL-AMIN

By Pamela Savage

Dr. Wendi Wills El-Amin did not always aspire to be a physician. Raised the daughter of a doctor and an educator in Houston, Texas, Wills El-Amin wondered whether it was even possible for a woman to be both a physician and a mother. Wishing to one day have a family, she started her freshman year at Virginia's Hampton University as a psychology major, hoping to perhaps go into social work or education.

During her time at Hampton, an insightful mentor told a young Wendi that her altruistic nature and diverse interests in social justice, psychology and education made her well-suited for a career in medicine, and so she jumped in and took it on faith that she could one day manage motherhood and medicine.

Fortunately, Wills El-Amin did make it to Georgetown University for medical training, and to Springfield, where in addition to being a practicing family physician and a mother to three daughters, she is the associate dean for equity, diversity and inclusion at Southern Illinois University School of Medicine.

Wills El-Amin credits SIU School of Medicine as being a workplace that champions female physicians, "I once reduced my time practicing medicine when my children were younger. I am here at SIU because they have created an environment for working moms to be able to practice medicine and be deans. Previously, I didn't know there was a place where I could do this."

As a physician leader, Wills El-Amin uses her position and influence to make the invisible visible for both her patients and students here in Springfield. She believes deeply in peoples' potential, and she puts power and passion into her work each and every day.

Wills El-Amin says she works hard to make her patients' needs visible, citing that as a physician, "you have to be proximate to people's narratives and lived experiences." She believes that being a family physician allows her to see the continuum of the human experience, from babyhood to aging. It is this closeness that allows

Wills El-Amin the opportunity to be an advocate and healer for individuals and the community at large.

Says Wills El-Amin of her work, "We don't want patients to keep secrets about who they are. We can't heal are when there secrets.

for the needs of the community and to help others tap into their potential. Says Wills El-Amin, "There is a lot of missed talent out there, so I ask, 'How as a community do we really utilize all the resources that we have?'"

One community-based project that Wills El-Amin is excited to help lead is the Health DEPOTS program (DEPOTS is an acronym for Delivering Equity Places Outside Traditional Settings). A collaboration between SIU School of Medicine's Office of Equity, Diversity and Inclusion and faith-based and community organizations like the Springfield Urban League and the NAACP, Health DEPOTS places health care professionals into the greater community to provide screenings, services and information. Providers meet their patients where they are to monitor things like weight, blood pressure or blood sugars, allowing people to make honest and informed decisions about their own health practices.

"We saw the importance of being able to monitor patients outside of traditional settings during COVID. Our patients were asking about things like hypertension, diabetes and obesity, so Health DEPOTS allow us to connect with patients in different ways outside the walls of SIU and to build trust within the community we serve," she said.

Out of her many roles, Wills El-Amin's most important role is that of mother to her three daughters, who she calls her earth, wind and fire. "A lot of my decisions are based on thinking: 'What is the world that I want for

When people don't feel comfortable and don't trust, they won't bring their full story, and if you don't have the right diagnosis, you won't have the right treatment."

Wills El-Amin brings this same commitment to honesty into her work as an equity advocate and community leader for the greater Springfield region. Wills El-Amin is on the boards of the Boys and Girls Club, Springfield YMCA, Springfield Memorial Foundation and the Community Foundation for the Land of Lincoln, all organizations that allow her to be a spokesperson

my girls to live in?' I want my daughters and other peoples' daughters to be leaders. I want them to have the same pay as everyone else. I want their voices not only to be heard, but to be translated into something meaningful."

That isn't to say it's always easy. Like so many working mothers, Wills El-Amin readily and humbly admits that wearing multiple hats can be hard, very hard in fact. When she is overwhelmed, she returns to her commitment to honesty and authenticity and asks herself: "Who were you before the world told you who you were supposed to be?" In doing so, she allows herself and others the space and grace to simply be who they are.





# BETSY DOLLAR

By Karen Ackerman Witter

Betsy Dollar is a tireless champion for the arts. She has raised the visibility of the arts throughout Springfield, made art more accessible to people of all ages and expanded the role of the Springfield Art Association as a community arts center. She has served as executive director of the SAA since 2009.

Growing up in a family of artists, Dollar has been an artist all her life. Her specialty is printmaking and handmade paper. Recently, she had a solo exhibition of her exquisite work at the UIS Visual Arts Gallery. She is also dedicated to creating opportunities for others to develop an appreciation of art and discover their own creativity. She has taught art to people of all ages, curated innumerable exhibitions and implemented creative initiatives to reach new audiences in engaging ways.

The SAA is a long-standing Springfield institution, founded in 1913. Dollar says the "founding mothers" believed everyone could be inspired and healed through art. "Their desire to improve society through the arts means very different things now, but the same idea rings true," says Dollar. "True invention and progress springs out of imagination and the arts. We are doing everything we can here to nurture a creative, supportive environment that values imagination and offers skill-building activities for people of all ages." Her intent is to embrace the philosophy of the founding mothers and reinterpret it in a 21<sup>st</sup> century model.

Current and former staff members sing Dollar's praises. She is a mentor to many, giving staff the freedom to work independently and try new things while providing a light, guiding hand when needed. She believes in teamwork, fosters a collaborative work environment and is quick to share credit with others. Staff members are encouraged to advance professionally and pursue other personal and professional ventures, including serving on boards of other organizations. Erika Holst, former curator of Edwards Place, describes Dollar as a mentor who celebrates creativity and gives her staff the freedom to come up with their own ideas and develop their strengths. "Under Betsy's mentorship, I developed from a novice curator to a leader of Springfield's history community and an accomplished historian," said Holst.

The community is the true beneficiary. Dollar's fingerprints are on virtually everything to do with the visual arts in Springfield – murals throughout the city, the annual Paint the Street event, an art gallery in the heart of downtown, renovation of the historic Edwards Place, summer art camps, art classes and events for youth and adults, expanded studio space, artist-in-residencies and creative collaborations with other organizations to make art enjoyable and

accessible to people of all ages and all walks of life. Dollar laughingly describes her position as ringleader of a five-ring circus.

Dollar played a pivotal role with the Centennial Capital Campaign, launched to fulfill the SAA's vision for a successful second century. Results included interior restoration of Edwards Place, remodeling the M.G. Nelson Family Gallery, updating existing studios and constructing new studio space for classes and demonstrations in glass, ceramics and metals.

Dollar also led a highly successful merger of the Prairie Art Alliance and the Springfield Art Association. The SAA Collective is now located in the historic Broadwell Pharmacy building on Fifth and Washington streets and is both an exhibition and retail space for local artists.

Dollar believes in partnerships and has managed successful collaborations with the Enos Park Neighborhood Improvement Association, McClelland Elementary School, Hope School, Garvey-Tubman Cultural Arts & Research Center and the Springfield Convention & Visitors Bureau. Some of her most notable accomplishments include the development of an ART AS THERAPY program for dementia and stroke survivors, partnering with the Garvey-Tubman Center to install murals on the east side of Springfield, renovating historic Edwards Place to its 19<sup>th</sup> century Lincoln-era appearance and expanding and diversifying art programs.

Dollar's leadership even extends to other nonprofit organizations. She served on the Dana-Thomas House Foundation board and Kidzeum board where she is currently board president. She is on the board of the Enos Park Neighborhood Improvement Association and was a key player in developing the Creative Reuse Marketplace and securing a significant grant from the Women for Women Fund of the Community Foundation for the Land of Lincoln.

Dollar delights in seeing children beam with pride when they show a parent something they created and also witnessing an adult having the nerve to try a new skill. She is especially gratified to hear positive comments from community members about art being more visible in Springfield. "People are noticing and appreciating the art," says Dollar.

We have Dollar to thank for that; she is truly a woman of influence.





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