

# Sailing on home after pulling into port in Iowa...



Mark and Mary

Mary Schoen-Clark had a conventional power desk parked in her office only briefly. When it started to give her the willies, she ousted it for something a little more her style - her family's much worn kitchen table. "I tried the "power" desk for about a week because a friend of mine told me 'I had to look the part of a CEO'... it made me so uncomfortable that I thought, 'no this isn't me.'" Says Mary laughing, one arm draped across the smooth, weathered tabletop. Most of the office furniture is pre-owned. The scuffed fleet that suits her just fine was plucked from the hulls of houses salvaged by EcoYouth a youth employment program of MidAmerican Housing Partnership (MAHP).

Her favorite office piece hangs on a wall. It's a painting, pirated away from her dad's office, showing a sailing ship gallantly tossing through a stormy sea and her love of the ocean. It's symbolic of her work, Mary says, gesturing to the artwork. As president of MidAmerican Housing Partnership (MAHP), she has navigated through choppy waters plenty of times. And she's emerged unscathed and seemingly unstoppable. Under her leadership, the housing agency that was founded in 1992 to develop and manage low- and moderate-income housing has had an admirable track record. Among them, creating over \$42 million in housing assets.

In MAHP's infancy, Mary and two others managed with a couple of desks, one computer, and enough in the bank to make payroll for six months. The office was in downtown Cedar Rapids Iowa, above a pizza place and a barbecue restaurant. They ate a lot, worked long hours writing grants and loved every minute of it. When the trio, Mary, the intern Rollie, and a Title 5 worker Annie, landed money to refurbish their first batch of 22 rental units, "Of course our little hearts were beating," Mary says. This year MAHP has an annual budget of over \$7 million dollars, and 40 employees. They will build and sell 14 single-family homes and manage over 400 rental units. They have had the attention of Vice President Al Gore; several Secretaries' of HUD and State Senators Harkin, Leach and Grassley are regular guests to the grand openings of their projects. And their board of directors has "raised" two of the last three Mayors of Cedar Rapids.

Mary was born in Indiana and her family moved to Oregon in 1961. Her mom dealt in antiques; her father was an executive with Consolidated Freightways.

At 6 she was dealing with customers in her mother's antique shop. At 9 she headed to work on the weekends with her dad, trotting from office to office telling people Dad was Vice



Camrick

President and that she wanted to take their name to report back that they were doing a good job. She was a bright, non-traditional high school student who was assigned to a remedial English class. The boredom of it motivated her to take college classes instead, thus giving her the distinction of graduating from college before she graduated from high school! She married Mark W. Clark in 1980 and studied early childhood development at Oregon State University. In 1982 son Camrick was born, "we passed him between us going from class to class and he became quite the showman in my child development classes" Mary says, clearly beaming with motherly pride. In 1984, she graduated with a Bachelor of Science degree with honors in Human Development and Family Life. That same year the Clark family moved to Cedar Rapids for Mark to take a job as a nuclear engineer.



Joshann

Mary tried to be a stay at home mom when daughter Joshann, now 19, was born. Then, she says, she "went bonkers" and applied for a volunteer job delivering commodity cheese through Hawkeye Area Community Action Program. She loaded up her Dodge Caravan with blocks of cheese, her new baby Joshann and 4-year-old son, Camrick, and went to work. "The elderly loved to see the kids come to the door but it was hard to leave because we were often their only visitors for the month. Even though they had a refrigerator full of cheese, they were always waiting at the door for us," Mary explains.

One thing led to another. She calls these things vectors, and sees quite clearly the points when her life led her down peculiar paths she otherwise would not have taken. Like when she came in second place for a job as a HACAP Head Start Nutritionist and took a job instead as nutritionist with the Elderly Congregate Meals Program. Clearly disappointed Mary said, "I was heart broken as I had planned to work for Head Start since before I started college." A year later she was promoted to Elderly Mental Health Coordination Specialist and in 1989 she was promoted to HACAP's Development Director position. That was the job that taught her to run a corporation, she says, "Community Action Agencies are complicated places that do a lot of different types of activities to meet the needs of the community."

As director, she vied for a \$1 million dollar grant that would be awarded to just four places in the country. For Mary while working at HACAP, the dream was to create 44 units of transitional housing for homeless women with children. Mary puts it this way, "We encircle them with the best the community could offer in housing and services for them and their children. We need to provided the tools to get their lives on track." They won the grant. "Lo and behold with odds lower than being struck by lightning no one thought we would get it," Mary says.

With that money InnCircle, transitional housing for homeless women and children was carved out of the 186 units of the old Hawaiian Inn hotel (a Former Ramada Inn). Children who where homeless and had nothing stepped into their new homes and were greeted by teddy bears and hand made quilts on the beds. "Imagine having nothing, then this," Mary says. "It was really an emotionally charged thing, both the volunteers that pulled the units together and the families who moved in had tears of joy in their eyes."

"InnCircle was a lesson, from it the need for long-term affordable housing became so obvious", Mary says. So MidAmerica Housing Partnership was born, a spin-off from two nonprofits, HACAP and Four Oaks. And Mary was chosen to lead the new organization.

“She’s a very special lady,” says Henry Royer, who at the time of MAHP’s creation was president and CEO of Merchants National Bank, and the first chairman of MAHP. Mary’s work with InnCircle left an indelible mark on him. Mary, Henry says, “is dedicated, smart and sympathetic to her constituents. And she knows that her agency can’t run with a deficit!”

The program moved from downtown to bigger but dismal quarters in a Quonset hut in the city’s Sewer and Water building. “The building was on the river and when it would rise we had to put our feet up under us to keep the mice from running over them, but then they started running over our fingers as we were typing and that was it!” To campaign for better quarters, Mary treated her board members to a meeting in the hut. “All of a sudden they had a new sensitivity to our conditions, they had forgotten what it was like since they were meeting in a swanky bank board room every month,” she says.

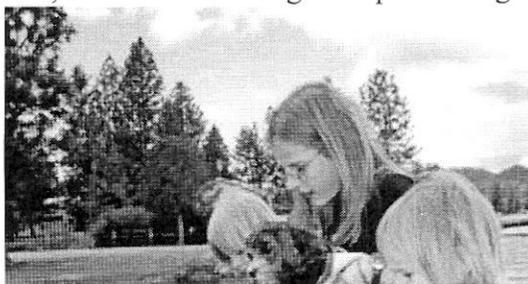


Mary and Maggie Mead Bear

Then one day Mary saw a for sale sign in front of the former Heabel Lumber Co. building at 701 Center Point Rd. NE. It was 18,000 square feet. And Mary was smitten. She kidnapped Henry and the rest of the crew to show them the building. Soon MAHP had a new home. The spacious building offered plenty of elbowroom for the growing organization. It included warehouse space for EcoYouth Salvage, the program that recycling parts of homes slated for demolition like trim, doors, windows, light fixtures and a showcase of pink toilets. At-risk teen-agers work there. It’s a program Mary initiated, she says; because she’s never forgotten her interest in child development and her own non-traditional high school days. She insists that the young workers take turns making lunch so they are fed and learn to cook; they can even take food home to their families. The work gives them a sense of pride, Mary believes, because it lets them help others instead of always being on the receiving end.

As a manager, she’s equally altruistic. “She’s easy to get along with and so enthusiastic about things that it just sort of carries over,” says Annie Schroth, who was one of the three original MAHP staffers, and now retired from the agency. She calls Mary one of the best bosses she’s ever had in her life. “She’s one of those people who really believes in what she’s doing, helping people help themselves.”

When asked why move to Oregon now after all these years of running MAHP and feeling the success of housing thousands of people? Mary says, in the words of Mr. Wizard a cartoon character from the 60’s, “‘drizzle drizzle, drezzle drome its time for this one to come home!’ While we have loved living in Iowa all our family lives in Oregon and just recently my oldest Camrick moved to Portland to work for Apple. And, maybe most importantly we adopted three little girls two years ago, Mika 14, Nia 6 and Jo 4, we want them to grow up knowing their grandparents and the rest of their family and ok..ok, you know I’m a planner... someday there will be grandchildren for me too, and I want to be part of that.”



When asked what will be the hardest thing about leaving Iowa Mary says, “I have formed some deep attachments to the people I serve

and the people who have made it ALL possible, the MAHP staff, board and donors and volunteers but I keep telling myself I'm not really leaving them I'm just getting the opportunity develop even more strong relationships with the people of Southwestern Oregon. Clearly, this is another vector for Mary as she prepares to travel west to Coos Bay and assume the role of Executive Director of Southwestern Oregon Community Action Committee. "Yes, that's true," says Mary, "this is another vector for me and my family, plus it brings me back to my roots in Community Action!"

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