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40 Under Forty

By Pete Millard

If the quest to expand charter schools in Wisconsin were a World War I battle, the husband-and-wife team of Michael Ostermeyer and Cindy Zautcke would not merely be fighting in the trenches. They would be the ones actually digging the trenches in which the war would be won or lost.

Ostermeyer, 39, a partner at the Milwaukee law firm Quarles & Brady, and Zautcke, assistant director of Marquette University's Institute for the Transformation of Learning, are dedicated to improving the education of Milwaukee's impoverished central city children.

Zautcke, 38, got involved in alternative education shortly after graduating from Luther College in Decorah, Iowa, in the mid-1980s. Her first teaching job was in a poor Nashville neighborhood while earning a master's degree at Vanderbilt University. Ostermeyer was attending Vanderbilt Law School at the time.

When the couple moved to Milwaukee in 1990, Zautcke turned down chances to teach English at more prestigious suburban schools in favor of alternative schools on Milwaukee's near south side that housed at-risk teenagers.

Zautcke taught at Grand Alternative High School in Milwaukee from 1990 through 1996. She also was one of the founders of El Puente High School in Milwaukee.

"She always had a soft spot for under privileged kids and thought they had the same capacity for learning as other kids" said Ostermeyer.

In 1997, after nearly seven years of teaching in alternative south side high schools and working as an education consultant at the Metropolitan Milwaukee Association of Commerce, Zautcke was asked to join the charter and choice school movement championed by Marquette University professor Howard Fuller. She accepted.

At the time she started working at the Wisconsin Charter School Resource Center at

Marquette, she also was the president of the Wisconsin Charter Schools Association.

"She has focused her career on the kids hardest to educate," said Fuller, director of the Marquette transformation institute. "She's also committed to empowering low-income parents to exercise power in determining the best place for their children."

While Zautcke devotes her time to public policy questions and tries to convince politicians to support more charter and choice options for central city parents, Ostermeyer approaches public education reform from a business perspective.

"For these schools to be available on a broad basis, you need to find some way for them to become credible business enterprises," Ostermeyer said. "One of the key elements is access to credit lines."

Ostermeyer has branched out his law practice to include school law. He said it was a natural extension of his real estate practice. He frequently

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travels to other states to speak on how charter schools can organize themselves to become viable business risks.

Ostermeyer was the principal consultant and author on the Milwaukee Public Schools mammoth Neighborhood Schools plan released in late 2000.

"MPS has come to realize when people have choices it needs to do a better job of accommodating them," Ostermeyer said. This (mindset) is reflected in the Neighborhood Schools plan."

Education reform is not the only central city initiative Ostermeyer has participated in. He was one of the founders of a Youth Credit Union for central city kids, working through the Boys & Girls Clubs of Milwaukee and Strong Funds, Menomonee Falls.

He also has been an active participant in the local Habitat for Humanity project for more

than 10 years and does all the group's legal work on a pro bono basis. In 2001, Habitat will close on more than \$1 million worth of property in putting up 20 new homes and completing a handful of rehabilitations.

Ostermeyer and Zautcke's community involvement stems from their fondness of

Milwaukee as a place to raise their three children.

"It is a good place to live even it has its warts," said Ostermeyer. "As much improvement as the public schools need, it's not bad when compared to others. We could be St. Louis or Kansas City."

MICHAEL OSTERMEYER



BIRTHPLACE:
Waukesha

FAMILY: Sons, Billy, 8, John, 3, and daughter, Elizabeth, 22 months

FIRST JOB: Cleaning chicken houses, and then things got really nasty when he started selling shoes at Kinney's

PROUDEST ACCOMPLISHMENT:
Earning his law degree from Vanderbilt University Law School

PERSONAL HERO: His great-grandfather (Albert Nesheim), a stern Norwegian father who put two siblings through seminary. He

also was an early supporter of Bob LaFollette and served on the Dane County Board with LaFollette.

CINDY ZAUTCKE

BIRTHPLACE: Milwaukee

FAMILY: Sons, Billy, 8, John, 3, and daughter, Elizabeth, 22 months

FIRST JOB: Business manager and clerical worker at Luther College

PROUDEST ACCOMPLISHMENT:
Besides my children, founding El Puento High School at Fifth and National

PERSONAL HERO: "People will think I'm brown-nosing, but it has to be Howard Fuller."

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