SUSAN SCHWARTZ TWIGGS, MSW
By

Halfway through her career in mental health, Susan Twiggs' work became more clearly focused. "I wanted to help children expand their thinking about the future. I wanted them to dream big."

Sue encountered an exciting program when she volunteered at her Maine community's public high school. Called Pathway Partners, the program helped students envision their futures. Each student was paired with a working professional who could show the students how to move ahead with their lives, along paths that the students themselves wanted to explore.

By regularly spending time with their mentors, the students learned more about their goals, their strengths, and how to overcome potential barriers they might face. They learned about what their mentors' jobs required in terms of education and experience. The student could also discuss informally the student's own internal barriers that might limit their dreams for the future.

"I met students whose family members hadn't gone to college, so they didn't think it was something they could do," explains Sue. "For some, their family's economic background caused the students to believe it was impossible."

Later, in Marshfield, Sue brought the program idea to Jane Wagner at Marshfield Senior High. Together and with others' help, they started Pathway Partners in 1999.

Sue and her brother grew up in Michigan. "My mother was the queen of unconditional love. My father was a businessman who liked to travel with all of us together."

Sue went to Catholic schools through 8th grade. She grew up reading Heidi and Nancy Drew mysteries. Her parents arranged private French lessons and piano lessons for her when they discovered she had perfect pitch and an excellent memory and interest in languages. She and her family toured the U.S. on many trips, encountering new cultures and new foods. She began to dream about going to France one day. Sue's family hosted an exchange student from Mexico. At sixteen, it was Sue's turn. "I went to France for the summer and lived in a small village. I had only basic French. I learned how to listen and became fluent in two months, thanks to help from my French sister, Rolande. We are best friends still after 60 years!"

Sue went on to the University of Michigan in Ann Arbor. "It was a revelation. I experienced a life of the mind — 40,000 smart people!" She took Psych 101 as a freshman and recognized that she had found a scholarly home. She spent her junior



Susan Twiggs

year abroad in France, discovered Piaget and the field of childhood development at the University, and began her lifelong friendship with Rolande. She graduated from the U.of M. Go Blue!

In 1970 she married John, and they moved to Minneapolis for him to attend medical school. She was awarded a master's degree in social work by the University of Minnesota.

Her first job out of college was with the Wilder Foundation working with children in foster care, their parents, and foster families in St. Paul, Minnesota. Sue and her husband had a BIG dream to travel around the world after John completed his medical internship. They spent a year experiencing countries such as Afghanistan that are no longer travel destinations.

Sue recalled, "We made a decision in Paris to have a family. Thomas was born in 1976 and Robert followed in 1980." John served as a Public Health physician in Appalachia in the National Health Service Corps. Following that the family moved to Rochester, MN for John to pursue a residency in pediatrics. Sue worked as a therapist for Lutheran Social Services at their office based in Rochester. John accepted a position at the Marshfield Clinic as a pediatric allergist. They moved to Marshfield in 1982.

Sue explored the possibility of working for the Marshfield Clinic but found its doors closed to wives of physicians at that time. She continued working for Lutheran Social Services at the Marshfield office, and in 1984, founded a partnership, Associated Counseling Services, with two other local counselors, Jim Welch and Carol Wesley. Sue saw families, couples, and individuals as clients. She especially enjoyed working with children. According to Sue, "Listening to children can help

them open up to unexpected possibilities. With so much life ahead of them, they have a greater potential for seeing things differently. Often they are able to put aside the issues they have and consider a more positive future."

Sue felt that adults, encumbered by their own issues and circumstances, were unable to recognize their children's problems. Many had difficulty helping their children. Some children felt uncomfortable talking with their parents about their deepest feelings even when the parents wanted them to.

Sue also began to get more involved in community projects that she saw had the potential to enhance children's growth, and to improve the lives of their caregivers. She concentrated on supporting public projects that were open to everyone, including the new public library, YMCA, and the water park, and intergenerational programs like Pathway Partners and Tiny Tigers.

In these projects, Sue has played many roles. She's been a founder, organizer, fundraiser, and donor; and an advocate speaking up for children who aren't normally given a voice in program development. A focus of her work throughout has been childhood mental health. Sue has advocated for programs that treat depression and sleep disorders.

With John she supports activities that strengthen families and improve childhood experiences, like the Marshfield Health System's Life Tools program and the new Boys and Girls Club in town. John and Sue have jumped on board to support the new Neonatal Intensive Care Unit at MHS's Children's Hospital.

After leaving the counseling partnership, Sue continued to be an entrepreneur in other areas. She began her own mediation practice, Beyond Conflict, where she offered consulting, training on conflict resolution skills, and mediation in the workplace. The Twiggs had some extra land with their home and in 2008, after teaching yoga for several years, Sue built Marshfield's first dedicated studio, the Karuna Yoga Studio. "My vision was to offer an environment where people could experience peace in their mind and heart while moving their body. Decades later, students continue to stop me and say how much the studio and practicing yoga meant to them." At about that same time, she began writing articles about maintaining one's physical and mental health through yoga for the Marshfield News-Herald. "Yoga is a liberating force," Sue says. "My practice helps me to let go of my anxiety and my fear about the future."

Sue decided after George Floyd's murder in 2020 that she had stood on the sidelines of racial inequity long enough and that she needed to educate herself and encourage other allies to do the same. Since that time, Sue has been reading with a national group, Cast Action Alliance.

Each year Sue gives out copies of Caste: the Origins of Our Discontents by Isabel Wilkerson to any interested readers. She funds and encourages others to donate toward scholarships nationwide for descendants of U.S. enslaved Africans whose ancestors were denied this educational right.

Nowadays, when she's not spending quality time with her kids and grandkids, Sue writes poetry and children's literature. She was active in a local group of poets, Free Verse. The group sponsored the Poet's Walk in the Arboretum at the local two-year campus of the University of Wisconsin. Free Verse also sponsored monthly poetry readings at the Marshfield Public Library.

Sue's first published poem was in the British literary journal Kindred Spirit in 1999. In the year 2000, she won a Certificate of Merit from the League of Minnesota Poets. She read her Invocation at the national convention of the National Federation of State Poetry Societies.

Stories of a pot-bellied pig, a friend's family pet, inspired Sue to turn to creating children's books in 2013. In 2020 she began research for a large project, meeting with a Holocaust survivor, Henry Brecher. They ended up being an ideal pair. Henry at 90 was ready to share his lifetime story, and Sue, as an experienced therapeutic listener, carefully received and documented it.

Sadly, Henry passed in 2024, but as he wished, Sue is currently adapting his early life into a children's book. With her experience writing poetry, she chose to turn Henry's experience as a child in Croatia during WWII and his eventual sheltering in America into a historical fiction novel-in-verse for readers aged 10-15. Sue is excited to publish and share this verse novel, saying that Henry's story needs to be read so children can experience the result of 'othering.' There is also a positive takeaway for the reader from Henry's story. That is to persevere and never give up. Henry went from being an orphan and a refugee to participating in the first American team to go overland to the South Pole. Both Henry and Sue had dreams in 5th grade to travel and explore, and they were able to fulfill them. Sue hopes to inspire students to nurture their own dreams and to never give up until they reach them!

Sue's website is suetwiggswrites.com. She invites interested readers to sign up by leaving your email address on the pop up on her website. As a counselor, a community organizer, as a yoga instructor, and as a writer Sue has been a leader in our community.