

Carol Gartner: a woman of many talents

Pittsburgh Zoo Retail Operations Manager Carol Gartner has worked for KM/SSA almost as long as she has been married.

After graduating from SUNY, Utica with an accounting degree, Carol moved to Denver in the early 1970s. One of her jobs was manager at the Sizzler Restaurant in Englewood. The owner of the franchise hired Ivan Gartner as her assistant manager. Ivan said that when he walked into the restaurant for the first time and saw Carol, he knew that he was going to marry her. After almost a year of dating, they got married even though Sizzler had a policy that married couples couldn't work together. They quit Sizzler and went to work for KM Concessions in 1980. Ivan previously worked for Kevin McNicholas at McNicholas Arena as well as for Leisure Foods, a partner company with K-M. Carol was hired to manage the gift shop at Buffalo Bill's Grave and Museum.



After 10 years of managing this KM-operated gift shop, Carol was asked to move east and manage the Pittsburgh Zoo's retail operations. Her husband was tapped to be the SSA General Manager at the zoo. Ivan is now Eastern Regional Vice President for SSA, and Carol continues to efficiently and to effectively manage the retail operations.

The Gartners were told of this opportunity to relocate to an area that neither had visited while vigorously working at the National Western Stock Show. Even with that pressure, they were able to get organized, pack, find an apartment and drive cross-country with their four-year-old son to be ready to work on March 1, 1990. This type of dedication and enthusiasm is one reason that Carol is one of the company's top retail managers. And it's a work ethic she learned early.

Raised on a dairy farm outside of Chester, New Jersey, one hour from New York City, Carol learned how to work hard. After all, she helped milk cows both morning and night.

Ivan recently mentioned that when Carol read the employee profile about Kevin Jones, she said she had no desire to be featured in an employee profile. After Ivan was notified that Carol had been selected for the next profile, he did not tell her. Ivan is somewhat concerned that he may be “in big trouble” when she reads this article. And this may be true when Carol reads that Ivan said their son was conceived at Buffalo Bill’s grave and was then born on Buffalo Bill’s birthday, which is February 26. Stefen is their only child and is a senior in high school. He has helped his parents at the zoo since he could stand on a milk crate.



Carol’s other talents

When not working at the zoo, Carol likes to bake pastries, cheesecakes and chocolate anything. Even though Carol makes the greatest cheesecakes, she doesn’t like sour cream or cream cheese. (Did she milk too many cows while growing up?)



She’s also a pro at decorating cakes – a talent that’s in great demand at the zoo as she creates scrumptious delicacies for many of the zoo’s galas and board meetings. If not baking, Carol spends her time browsing through cookbooks. She has more than 200. Her favorite is *New Basics Cookbook*, which features 857 recipes as well as entertaining tips and cooking basics from selecting the right cut of meat to how to choose a turnip.

While Carol enjoys baking goodies, she doesn’t sample many of her sweets, preferring to get input from everyone else. However, she doesn’t like to share her favorite treat – M&Ms.

Since Christmas is her favorite holiday, Carol uses her cake decorating skills to create award-winning gingerbread houses. It’s not unusual for Carol to decorate and donate 20 or so gingerbread houses each year to charities, such as the local childrens hospital and senior citizen centers. She does this labor of love to help cheer people up during the holiday season.

A great evening for Carol is to go out with Stefen and Ivan for dinner and see a movie or attend a show. With Stefen being a senior in high school, these special evenings don't occur as often as she would like. He plans to attend college next fall, but hasn't decided where he wants to go.

Carol doesn't have a favorite sport, but what she does enjoy is watching Stefen play sports. She went to soccer games while Stefen was in elementary school, now she enjoys watching volleyball when Stefen plays.

If Carol could take a trip anywhere, Ivan said she would travel to the coast of Maine to enjoy the cool weather and the rocky shoreline.



Carol as a SSA employee

Perhaps the most challenging aspect of being an SSA employee for Carol is trying to find a happy medium in balancing the zoo's mission with the need to meet financial requirements for the company. Carol is very conscious of what she selects to sell in the zoo's three gift shops. She won't sell pink elephants or animals that feature human characteristics. Carol wants items with animals that look realistic, whether it's a t-shirt, a plush, a PVC animal, a postcard, etc. She tries to offer a mixture of merchandise to appeal to the more than 700,000 zoo guests.

Carol manages four full-time SSA employees and 20 part-timers in the two shops, which are open seasonally, and in the year-round shop, which is located in the zoo's 43,000 square-foot aquarium.

Carol helped design the gift shops to offer a retail experience that is an extension of the zoo visit. For example, when visiting the "Currents" gift shop in the PPG Aquarium, you'll see signage near the plush that's similar to educational signs found near animal exhibits. Shoppers are able to learn more about sharks while deciding what plush shark to purchase. In this spectacular shop, Carol features not only aquatic plush creatures, but also apparel, home décor, books and jewelry as well as consignment artwork by regional artists.



Among the many creative retail tools that Carol uses to increase sales is opening the Safari Outpost, which offers upscale merchandise, during evening events and promoting the purchase of gift/souvenir bags. Carol designed this sales program to meet the needs of groups, primarily school kids, who visit the zoo and want to take home a souvenir, but don't have time to shop or the leader doesn't want to have the group in the gift shop. Carol creates the bags with input from the group leader. Bags may include a pencil, a zoo patch, a small plush, a key chain, stickers, etc. The price ranges from \$3 - \$12.

Carol's favorite zoo is the 77-acre Pittsburgh Zoo and PPG Aquarium, home to more than 1,500 animals, not including the 2,000 plus fish. The zoo exhibits one of her favorite animals - - the naked mole rat. Carol likes this animal because it's so ugly with its wrinkly, hairless pinkish skin that it's cute. And some of her favorite people in the zoo/aquarium industry is Dr. Barbara Baker, the zoo's director, and her husband, Dayton Baker, the director of the National Aviary, also in Pittsburgh. Kevin McNicholas is another person she holds in high regard.



For more than 10 years, Carol has been an integral part of the SSA team at the Pittsburgh Zoo. During her tenure, she has seen the zoo totally renovated with naturalistic habitats where visitors can experience a touch of the wild. And for 23 years, Carol has been married to a man who certainly knows her likes - and dislikes.