

For Minnesota Zoo GM Laurel Wright, work is almost more “fun” than play!

The federal government defines “work” as *any activity for wages or salary, for profit or fees, or for payment in kind. One hour or more of such activity constitutes work.* Many consider work a necessity, but not Laurel Wright, the General Manger at the Minnesota Zoo. She loves to work, and she claims she works all the time.



Laurel (glasses) baking cookies with her sister Mary

The retail business has been in Laurel’s blood since high school when she started to work in the pet department at the local Woolworth’s store in Duluth, Minnesota. She also toiled in the housewares and candy departments. However, her first job was delivering newspapers to residents living in the hills overlooking Lake Superior. A town Laurel described as being quite pretty in the summer, but absolutely horrible in the winter (with its snowstorms and cold lake winds).

After graduating from high school, she went to college at the University of Wisconsin-Stout in Menomonie, Wisconsin where she majored in fashion merchandising and clothing, textiles & design, receiving a double degree. Laurel explained her choice of degree, “I really liked working retail, and decided to get a degree in the field.”

After college, she went to work for Shopko as a management trainee. Since then she’s had years of work experience, ranging from retail giants, like Shopko, Meryvn’s and Dayton’s to the amusement park industry. While living in Denver in the early 1990s and working as a store manager at a local Mervyn’s, she decided to leave as she said she felt she was beating her head against the wall. At that time, Laurel went to work at the popular local amusement park, Elitch Gardens where she was responsible for the park’s retail operations and instrumental in opening new retail shops when the attraction moved to its new downtown site. After the move, the local company sold to Premier Parks, now



Laurel, 2 years old (Dad in back)

Six Flags empire. In talking with a vendor about the change, he recommended she talk with KM Concessions about job opportunities. Eventually she did make the contact and was hired as the company's retail director for the Denver Zoo in 1996.

Her first day of work at the Denver Zoo was during Wildlights, the holiday light extravaganza, and she clearly remembers standing in the zoo's gift shop with Kevin Jones, Tim Brantley and Kevin McNicholas. KM told her she would be fired if she ran out of the popular kid's book, *Everyone Poops*, which features the scoop on poop. She must not have, as she is still working for KM/SSA!

After several years at the Denver Zoo, she resigned that position as her husband accepted a job in the Minneapolis area, and they relocated. She continued her work relationship with the company doing contract projects and providing retail training. During this "sabbatical," Laurel said KM always maintained he wanted to find her a home, and he finally did at the Minnesota Zoo. When Service Systems Associates assumed the gift operations at the institution in 2003, Laurel became the General Manager.

Her family

She met her husband Kevin in Bruser's Pub in Beaver Dam (WI) where she was the manager at the local Shopko. She laughingly claims he was the only one that asked her to dance two times. He invited her out for the next night, but she was leaving on a trip and had to say no. They met again when she had to call the police about a bomb threat at the big box store she was managing. And being a police officer, Kevin responded. They dated for a month, and then got married in a small chapel in Madison, Wisconsin. Even though her parents didn't attend the wedding as they only had two days notice, the family approved of Kevin as her choice – a good thing as the couple has been married 28 years. The union has produced a daughter, Jill. The 27-year-old works at a



private university in Columbus teaching cello and performing in area orchestras.



Laurel's Dad, Joe

Her husband, Kevin, works for FedEx Freight. Laurel shared it was great to have her own personal shipping expert as well as the discount on shipping charges.

Laurel enjoys being with her dad. She lost her mom while she was pregnant with Jill. She said, "I cherish my father; he's the glue of the family." She has an older brother living in Arizona and three younger sisters who are scattered around the country.

She would like to take her father to Italy. Her ancestors came from Bojano in west central Italy, and she wants to enjoy the natural beauty and fascinating history with her father and stepmother. Laurel and Kevin travel frequently with her parents. The group has traveled to Hawaii, taken a two-week Mediterranean cruise and visited many locales around the United States. She said her dad is a cool guy. She recently attended her father's 85th birthday party in Tucson. The festivities included 100 of her father's friends from all over. She described the festivities as one filled with dancing and plenty of laughter.



Dad (Joe), Stepmom (Rose), Laurel & Kevin

“I do love traveling,” she added.



Daughter, Jill

Her most valued accomplishment is raising her daughter Jill with Kevin. Even more poignant is that she has two other kids from a childhood marriage, but has limited contact with them. Laurel claims her daughter keeps her grounded and reminds her that work is not everything, and there are other things in life. She shared, “Jill is a great human being, and I miss being around her everyday.”

Laurel added that she equally treasures her husband . . . and work.

she used to golf, bike ride, cross-country ski, exercise, but stopped because her husband was so competitive. She explained that he would try to help her, but he would go too fast or take the most treacherous trails, and as a result, would take the fun out of the sport. She shared her husband uses cross-country skis to go uphill, a concept she declares ludicrous.

However, she's not a total couch potato. On a recent family vacation to Mackinac Island, a state park in Michigan, Laurel, her husband and, daughter took a bike ride. To get around the island, a person

Laughingly, she blames her husband for her lack of physical and outdoor activities. She said that



Suiting up for the “Accelerator” ride at Elitches

walks, rides a bike or uses the horse and buggy taxi. On these rides, Laurel brought up the rear, while the father-daughter duo would circle back and check on her. She maintains that her daughter helped to keep the pair connected.

She added, “I’m not an overly athletic person, but when I do engage in athletic endeavors, it has to be at my pace – a snail’s pace . . . so instead I work.”



Laurel & Kevin in Kauai, Hawaii

When not working . . .

When asked what she does in her free time, Laurel started laughing. “I love work, I work all the time.” However, she added she likes to read, especially lawyer-type books, as she likes the suspense. She believes in the philosophy of reading the book and then moving on.



Laurel with sisters Mary (left), and Char (right)

She also likes to entertain. However, Laurel doesn’t want anyone to know she can cook “really well” as she’s concerned she will be transferred to manage a food operations for the company.

When not working, Laurel enjoys sipping a glass of wine in the evening while sitting on her deck in rural Minnesota – but living in Minnesota, it’s really a three-season screened porch. When asked what she couldn’t live without, Laurel replied if it has to be a material thing, it’s her

wine. She quickly added, “I’m not a lush, I just enjoy it. I can love my wine, can’t I?”

Few people realize Laurel is a pro at playing cribbage, a popular card game where combinations of cards over a series of hands accumulate points, which are tallied on a scoring board. While she consistently wins against family and friends, she’s been known to let others win.

“I really absolutely love Bette Midler.” She said she loves listening to songs of the multi Grammy Award-winning



Enjoying a glass of wine with Jill

singer. However, Laurel likes all kinds of music. With a musician daughter, she has been exposed to a variety of music.

One of her favorite television shows is *American Idol*, a singing talent contest to determine the best “undiscovered” singer in the country and one of the most highly publicized music competitions in the world. It’s a program she claims makes her stop thinking about work. She quickly adds that it will never be her up there (performing). Occasionally she’ll watch the *Amazing Race*, as she likes the educational aspect of the program in learning about different places.

Laurel also has a subscription to *People* magazine, a weekly magazine of celebrity and human-interest stories. “It’s totally unlike me,” she exclaimed. However, she maintains she reads it to keep up on the fashions and again, it makes her stop thinking about work. “It takes my brain out of work,” she added.



In the mid-70s, she used to go camping by herself with a two-man green canvas pup tent. She described the adventures as “a blast.” On one trip, she traveled to Canada. She recalled while driving home in her VW bug, her route took her near Niagara Falls where six million cubic feet of water go over the crest line every minute – she couldn’t figure out why there was water on her windshield when it wasn’t raining. Another trip took her south to Florida where she went to Disney World and remembers meeting a lot of nice people who

looked after her at the campgrounds. She quickly added she wasn’t stupid, “It made me a really good person. I got to know myself really well.” However, she remembers her parents freaking out, but as a parent now, she would encourage her daughter to do it.

Even though Laurel claims to work all the time, she does realize the necessity of taking time for herself and her family – and she does.



Kevin & Laurel enjoying a Hawaiian sunset