

PEOPLE OF ACTION

Tanya Atkinson

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(Member since 2017)

When Tanya Atkinson decided to go into social work, her parents questioned her career choice. But they need only to look in the mirror to see why their daughter wanted to dedicate her life to helping others.

“My parents were always very engaged in the community, always there for anyone who needed help and they were always there for family, too,” Tanya said.

Growing up on a dairy farm near the small town of Boscobel, Wisconsin, Tanya and her sister were surrounded by close-knit extended family—people who were community-oriented, exemplified love and respect for the land and valued hard work.

After graduating from Carroll University, Tanya embarked on a career in social work. She worked with youth in Arizona and Wisconsin where she saw the damaging impact laws had on young people—policies that failed to address the root causes of inequality in the juvenile justice system.

Inspired to chip away at those social injustices, Tanya completed a master’s degree in social work from the University of Wisconsin–Madison where her studies in public policy focused on children, families and community. She landed an internship at the state capitol working for then Wisconsin Rep. Tammy Baldwin and later volunteered for Baldwin’s U.S. congressional campaign, where Tanya honed her skills as an organizer.

“I was so fortunate to have the opportunity to work for and learn from someone as brilliant and authentic as Sen. Baldwin,” said Tanya, who continued to work for the state legislature for a couple years with Rep. Peter Bock and the late Rep. Becky Young, where she gained “incredible experience working in public policy and advocacy.”

Tanya established the Milwaukee office for Kids Forward (formerly Wisconsin Council on Children and Families), a child advocacy organization, and continued her focus on welfare reform and juvenile justice policy efforts. A stint on the board of Planned Parenthood Advocates of Wisconsin led to being selected as a statewide organizer and field manager. Her next role was Planned Parenthood of Wisconsin’s vice president of public affairs and education, then chief external affairs officer. Finally, when her predecessor retired, she threw her hat in the ring for president and CEO.



*Tanya and her wife, Laurie.
Tanya with her sister and parents.*

Leading Planned Parenthood of Wisconsin provides an ideal platform for Tanya to ply her keen leadership and organizational skills while fulfilling a deep commitment to equity and justice. She's clearly found her niche at an organization she sees playing a vital role in Milwaukee's overall healthcare tapestry by providing a wide breadth of specialized, nonjudgmental care to women, men, and people of all genders in areas with disparate public health outcomes.

She is also proud of Planned Parenthood's contribution to the vibrancy of our communities by empowering people to engage socially, economically and politically. "When I'm out at events, it's rare to not have people share their stories with me: 'You were there when I needed you and I would not be a lawyer, a nurse, a teacher, a mom, a dad, if it weren't for Planned Parenthood,'" Tanya said.

When the pandemic hit, Planned Parenthood's services continued fairly seamlessly thanks to the organization's ongoing investments in telehealth platforms. The educational services staff pivoted to COVID-19 education, prevention, and vaccination efforts as well as outreach to those struggling in the wake of the pandemic: young people isolated at home, the LGBTQ+ community and patients and families struck by the virus.

The disparity in COVID illnesses and deaths revealed systemic racism, including throughout the healthcare industry, according to Tanya. "It was really stark. Watching what happened with COVID amplified how critical it is to continue our work towards creating spaces and places to eliminate racism."



While Tanya and her wife, Laurie Reisener, a registered nurse, were fortunately able to isolate and work from home, the challenges definitely provided many lessons from a leadership perspective. She also experienced the fear and helplessness of not being able to attend to her sister's family, who all contracted COVID, and her dad, who had unrelated health issues, although she is quick to add that "so many others had it so much worse."



Tanya with family and friends.

Outside of work, Tanya and Laurie enjoy soaking up Milwaukee's live music, art, entertainment, sports and great food offerings, bringing their dog Finley along whenever possible. And in normal times, they love traveling throughout Wisconsin and beyond. Tanya, who has done stand-up comedy in the past, still does some comedy writing and tries to find the time to upcycle old furniture. "I also like fishing even though I'm really bad at it."

Encouraged by sponsor Harry Drake and member Theresa Reagan, Tanya joined Rotary in 2017, and as pandemic restrictions lift, she looks forward to getting back to Memorial Hall and reconnecting with people.

"There's that backdrop [the four-way test] and every time I walk in the room, I see all these people who believe so strongly in those principles. Rotary is full of people who care deeply about the community and that's what I appreciate the most. I want to thank Mary McCormick and the whole leadership team for the huge effort that goes into having such an organized, efficient and engaged club."

Editor's Note: Rotary People of Action is a bi-monthly series written by a group of Rotarians. This feature was written by Mary Bolich.