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Regional

Voss feels people need to know how nature works

Some people think that graduating from college puts an end to their education. Others believe that it is after college that learning really begins and that is also the time to share one's knowledge in order to make the world a better place. One of these people is Sheila Voss.

Voss was born in Winter Park, Florida. She received her bachelor's degree in English and Communications from Pennsylvania State University and her master's degree in Environmental Sciences from Southern Illinois University Edwardsville. Today she is Vice President of Education for the Missouri Botanical Gardens.

Voss credits her undergraduate degree at Penn State for her interest in environmental education. "Where I went, others were getting jobs at investments firms, but soon I realized that I wanted to deepen my work with natural sciences," she said. "I got a job at Sea World working at the Science Education Department doing science writing, then started pursuing more work in science education. I moved up here in St. Louis about 15 years ago, and when I was looking to deepen my environmental science knowledge, I looked around and the program at SIUE in Environmental Science really caught my eye."

Most people see aquariums, zoos and botanical gardens as recreational places, but these places also play an important role in conservation efforts and public education. "Most visitors come [to the Botanical Garden] for a wonderful day with their families and friends," Voss said. "They are not necessarily coming with an agenda of learning something, but some of them are and those are the ones taking classes and signing up for more in-depth learning experiences," she said.

Even though the majority of visitors to the Missouri Botanical Garden come for its beauty, Voss firmly believes that during these visits, a different experience can also take place. "There is also this layer of other learn-



Photo by Steven Voss

Sheila Voss with her children at the SIUE Gardens.

ing experiences about the role and value of nature, plants, and landscape, . . . in the great outdoors," she said.

Because Voss believes education is an ongoing process and despite working in one of the world's best botanical gardens, she visits other similar institutions with her family. "It is really easy to let your life get overwhelmed with work," she said. "If you are working parents, you know there are those

obligations and even if you are stay-home parents, there are all these demands for your time and it is so easy to get wrapped up that if you do not do this or that after school, then somehow you are not investing in your child as much," Voss said. "Take a breath, slow down and manage your time with your kids more," she said, stressing the importance of weaving in one's daily schedule downtime with the family.

Voss believes this is particularly true when you live in a big city. "There is a great recent book 'Biophilic Cities' [by Timothy Beatly], which is all about integrating nature into urban planning and design," she said. "It is all about how cities use creative ways trying to ensure biodiversity," she said. The book focuses on how plants, animals, and other creatures share our living space and what role they play in the larger ecosystem. "From

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an ecological stand point, that is one thing that definitely keeps me up at night—as a professional and as a mom—people not having a real sense of the life support system," she said. Voss describes this system as an urban tree canopy, which plays an important role in water management, air quality, and habitat protection. "We do not think of those things in our daily life. We are not thinking about this ecology around us," Voss said.

Voss recently wrote a chapter for the book "After the Academy" published by the College of Arts and Sciences at SIUE. One of the episodes she recalled in her chapter focused on her master's in environmental sciences. For her thesis, Voss decided to pursue a question about the relationship between corporate environmental and financial performance. "In doing so, I had to talk to engineers, to accountants and MBA students, energy resource specialists," she said. Voss had to take into consideration all of these different areas of expertise and examine their connection to the ecological services that these decision makers influence.

For Voss, this is a fundamental issue. "While many corporations out there are indeed putting ecological services into their decision-making, it is falling through the cracks," she said. "My experience in doing that study is that everyone, no matter what career track they follow, can benefit from knowing how the natural world works," Voss said.

Aldemaro Romero is the Dean of the College of Arts and Sciences at Southern Illinois University Edwardsville. His show, "Segue," can be heard every Sunday morning at 9 a.m. on WSIE, 88.7 FM. He can be reached at College_Arts_Sciences@siue.edu.