

South grad renovating alma mater, other district buildings

Family ties to Waukesha go back more than century

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WAUKESHA — Kate Egan's family has called Waukesha home for a long time. Her maternal grandfather, Gordon Brember, was born here in 1918, and attended the Waukesha School District, like both her parents would, just like she did herself along with her husband. Today, younger members of the family are working their way through the same schools.

The family's connection to the school district runs strong, particularly when it comes to Waukesha South High School. Egan's parents actually moved their residence to ensure she and her siblings would graduate from their alma mater.

Though she doesn't recall a single moment when she knew she wanted to study architecture, Egan remembers an experience that began to kindle that passion: designing a house in eighth grade.

"I always imagined what that space would look like in 3D as opposed to 2D; lines on a page," she said. "I'm a really good planner, in terms of laying out spaces and thinking about how people



Submitted photo

Kate Egan outside Waukesha South, the high school she graduated from and is now redesigning.

are going to interact and occupy those spaces."

But design wasn't the only learning experience to help Egan on her journey. In fact, she said the broad range of experiences she had laid a strong foundation for later pursuits. Studying

German for five years with a tight knit group of students and a beloved teacher, Susan Otto – who they called "Frau" – led to studying abroad in Europe. Egan said that exposure to the

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Old World cultivated an appreciation for the architecture there, particularly in Germany and Paris. "It definitely fostered a love for building, a love of the built environment," she said.

Studying Honors English was another educational expires Egan credits with sharpening her critical thinking skills.

Now, decades after graduation, Egan works for Bray Architects and is redesigning the school buildings that weren't just a part of her own life, but the lives of family members and neighbors going back generations. She said it helps not having to learn the names of all the schools she's working on, which is particularly handy when that list includes 16 names.

Being a district alumna, Egan's insider perspective of

past school layouts informs her decisions about how to design future ones. She remembers what worked well and what didn't regarding traffic flow, ease of use, and time efficiency. In particular, the old cafeteria at Central Middle School, now Les Paul Middle School, was known for its less-than-optimal design.

"As a student, the only way to get there (is) to go all the way through the connection piece (between buildings)," Egan said. "You have to cross the food line in the process."

Principal Rob Bennet mentioned the cafeteria as a concern; it wasn't just inefficient but below grade, so people in wheelchairs couldn't exit easily in an emergency.

"I said, 'Yeah, let's tear it down and build a new one,'" Egan said.

The new cafeteria will have improved access for all students and staff, more daylight, and better traffic flow. "Before, nobody wanted to be

in the cafeteria," she said.

Egan is also proud of putting in an elevator at Butler Middle School, which will provide wheelchair access to the entire building as opposed to just the main level. "You couldn't do anything else," she said. "It's a major thing for the school... We design our buildings with people in mind (and) we shouldn't separate people based on their physical abilities." Adding accessible bathrooms is a key feature in many of the district's renovations.

With a brother teaching at Horning Middle School, a brother-in-law serving as an associate principal at Butler Middle School, the drive to improve the district's facilities continues to be a personal one for Egan. "It's exciting to be making improvements to both of their schools," she said. Her niece is also attending Randall STEM Elementary School, the same elementary school as her hus-



Submitted photo

Kate Egan during her 1999 study abroad trip with her German class.

band, mother, and grandmother.

For those working toward graduation and future careers, Egan advises flexibility, a can-do attitude and critical thinking skills.

"This is going to be tough to top in my career," she

said. "The course of my education gave me a great foundation to go out into the world. It gave me not only pride in my community, and who I was and who I was becoming, but confidence to go out into the world and make it better."