

# Women of Influence

**THE**  
**Business**  
**Journal**  
SERVING GREATER MILWAUKEE

## Marlene Doerr

Executive Director, SHARP Literacy Inc.

### What is the single greatest business challenge that women face today?

"My personal single challenge as a woman executive director has been in opening doors for conversations with business leaders to have an articulate dialogue about the enormous needs of our city students. The key . . . is networking, and it has taken me a long time to earn the respect from many remarkable business leaders."

Marlene Doerr's inspiration for the SHARP Literacy program came to her in the mid-1990s, while she was a docent at the Milwaukee Art Museum.

She observed that children's imaginations were animated by visual stimulation. She theorized that the visual arts could be used to teach students about writing, history and current events. Doerr developed the core program by working with Milwaukee-

#### NONPROFIT LEADERSHIP

area educators to create a second-grade workbook and corresponding courses based on her education through visual arts theory.

"I watched how you could attract the attention in a very positive way and build a love of learning when you brought students in front of visual arts," Doerr said.

Now, 12 years later, SHARP (Student Historical Art Resource Program) has reached more than 40,000 second- through fifth-grade students in almost 30 schools in the Milwaukee area. During the 2006-07 school year, students involved in the program were tested before and after the course. The results indicated that SHARP students had increased their vocabulary and writing

skills by 40 percent to 70 percent.

"Because Milwaukee suffers from a tremendous gap in access to the arts and creative literacy programs, I feel that the development of SHARP has had an important impact on our community," Doerr said.

SHARP students have participated in initiatives such as the "A Book in Every Child's Hand" and have taken field trips to the Milwaukee Art Museum. In 2007, fourth-grade SHARP students in 30 greater Milwaukee schools collaborated to create a book called "All About Wisconsin." The professionally published book was entirely researched, written and illustrated by the students.

SHARP meets the academic standards of the Milwaukee Public Schools system. The program costs about \$100 per student and is paid for through sponsorships and donations to SHARP Literacy.

"All of this has occurred because one woman had the vision, the ideas, the leadership and the capacity to carry out this accomplished literacy program," said Harry Holz, who serves as secretary on the SHARP Literacy board of directors.

— Shelby Sapusek



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