

Organizational Leader Spotlight

Bernie Smith is the Director of the Wellsville Joint Recreation Commission (WJRC) and was born and raised in Wellsville, Kansas. She joked that she is related to half the people in this town. She earned her degree in Education from Ottawa University in 1995 and went on to complete her master's degree from Mid-America Nazarene University. She took over this position in 2021.

To get some background about how Bernie ended up in this position, we needed to find out a bit more about her occupational journey. She tells a great story about how when she met her husband, Brandon, they had moved back to Louisiana where he was from due to a job he had. She said she lived down there a while but "it was different and not my home," she admitted. When she was pregnant with her first son, she told Brandon she was "moving home and I would love for him to come along." As the story goes, Brandon came back with her, and they have been here in Wellsville ever since. Once back in the area, Bernie started her teaching career at Spring Hill High School and worked there until 2004. Bernie and Brandon have been married for 27 years and have three sons – Bryce, Trajen and Ian.

In the fall semester of 2004, Bernie accepted a position at the Wellsville School District. She was a much-loved teacher and member of the USD 289 staff until leaving the teaching field in 2021 to take a position at the Wellsville Recreation Commission. When asked what her first goal was when she took over as the Director of the WJRC, she said, "Initially, I wanted to create an atmosphere of connectivity and communication. I wanted to make sure we were visible to the community." Bernie has now been at the WJRC for one year and feels that she has accomplished that goal – increased visibility of the WJRC to the community and increased programs offered.

The WJRC is managed by the board of directors. One person is school appointed, one is city appointed and the remaining three are at large positions. The varied background of the appointees is to help bring together people who have different perspectives on how the WJRC should be run. These people are elected for a four-year term. They meet once each month and always look at changes through the lens of what is best for the participants and the community. Bernie said she relies on them a lot when making decisions. The board approves any large purchases and the communication is open, so that they all understand the programming and can help effectively communicate to the community. Bernie says, "The goal is to have a great partnership between the WJRC and our community."

Regarding the WJRC programming, Bernie wanted to keep the kids' programs relatively the same but admits that participations has increased through additional communication. Currently, Bernie comments that there really isn't space for any additional programs. She said, "My goal in three years is to increase all age programming and upgrade facilities. We are still brainstorming how to maximize the use of the current WJRC space or how we could obtain additional space. I'd like to offer a cornhole league, pickleball courts, and additional outdoor basketball courts." Her dream is to have an indoor facility for the community someday that could house a fitness area, indoor walking track, WJRC offices and even a multi-sport turfed area and drop-down batting cages.

When asked about the challenges of the WJRC this past year, Bernie say, "Getting volunteers to coach and finding paid umpire positions has proven to be really taxing." She wants our community to know that she can train people to umpire via a local clinic. There is a certification available, too, that allows umpires to get paid more. She admits, "The high school students have been fabulous umpires for the kids' programs." The WJRC cannot function without these positions. Bernie stated, "Coaches can schedule and run their own practices. They communicate this information with their team. They act as game supervisors. I work with the volunteer coaches to make it as easy as possible for them. I realize most of them have full-time jobs. The coaches' job is really about kids learning the basics. We want them to be active and have fun doing it."

There have been lots of successes in this past year as well. Bernie said one thing that stood out as a big success has been purchasing, obtaining, and installing the new playgrounds. If you haven't been out to the WJRC ball fields recently, there is a new playground for the two-five year old kids and one for the five-12 year old kids. In the past, when there was just one playground, Bernie said, "The older kids were too rambunctious for the little ones to play. These new playgrounds solve that problem, so the little kids can play without fear of being knocked down."

A typical day for Bernie includes starting her day at the WJRC office around 6am. She works Monday through Thursdays and on Saturday mornings. During the mornings on these days, she works to complete administrative tasks in the office. In the afternoon, she goes out into the parks until mid-afternoon. During this time, she preps the soccer, flag football, softball and baseball fields depending on the season. At Christmas time, she puts up the decorations around the walking track. She typically goes home in the later afternoon to rest before the evening shift begins. She is back at the office by 4pm until 10pm depending on game schedules.

Bernie's motivation that keeps her coming back to her job every day is seeing the kids happy when they find success in little things like contacting a ball for the first time, learning, and doing

something they didn't know they were capable of. It's motivating to see that we are getting everyone in the community involved in our programs."

When asked if she could go back, if she'd change anything, she said, "If I could go back to the beginning of this job, I wouldn't change anything. Everything I've done in my career has helped me be successful in this position. I loved the years I spent teaching kids. But if I would have known there was a degree in Parks and Rec when I went to college, I would have chosen that. I chose to teach because that was an avenue to coach kids in sports. This job at the WJRC allows me to do more coaching, which is what I love most of all. I can step in to fill in gaps that need to be filled at any time. I can help coach a team, ref, or umpire a game. I love it all."

We talked about changing the world. When asked what three things she'd do if she could change the world, she responded this way: "1) I'd find a cure for dementia and Alzheimer's; 2) There would never be another poorly treated animal; 3) I'd eliminate hate and entitlement in this world. You can disagree with someone without hating them. And it would be nice if kids still felt they needed to earn what they get."

A book that was very inspirational to Bernie is called Reach for the Summit, by Pat Summit. Pat Summit was a coach at the University of Tennessee. The book talks about how to reach the summit of life. Bernie said, "I loved the 12 principles of life she outlines and found I have worked to live my life by them and help to instill them in others."

If you'd like to contact Bernie Smith or find information about the WJRC programs, you can go to the website at <https://wjrc.recdesk.com/Community/Page?pageId=8574>, email wellsville.wjrc@gmail.com or call 785.883.4532.

