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## Native Neapolitan raises the bar in fostering Collier arts

PROFILES IN PARADISE

bobHARDEN

[bobharden@hotmail.com](mailto:bobharden@hotmail.com)

I am grateful that in my youth I had the opportunity to learn music, to perform on stage with my peers and to be exposed to the arts. I believe these activities contribute to the development of a healthy imagination and self-esteem.

While our public schools have reduced focus on this important need, the United Arts Council of Collier County strives to enrich lives and strengthen the community through the power of the arts. It provides arts education to at-risk students and outreach services to those who might not otherwise have access of the arts. It also connects arts organizations, artists, galleries and arts educators with one another.

Katie Schweikhardt has served the UAC as executive director for the past year. The native Neapolitan graduated from Naples High School. Her mother, a guidance counselor for Collier County Public Schools, worked at Golden Gate Middle School for most of her career.

Katie graduated cum laude from Southern Methodist University in Dallas with a degree in foreign languages and literatures (German and Spanish) and earned her juris doctor from the University of Florida. She worked as an attorney for 11 years with The Schweikhardt Law Firm, which was founded by her father, and assumed ownership of the firm after his retirement in 2007.

As an attorney, she worked with families who were losing their homes to foreclosure. She saw, for the first time, hungry kids in her own neighborhood. "This was unacceptable to me and I gave up practicing law to help make my hometown a better place," she says. Before joining UAC, she

worked with the Harry Chapin Food Bank as director of programs and Collier County food coordinator.

Katie was a part of the Leadership Collier Class of 2014 and learned about the UAC on arts day. "It sounded very similar to my job at the food bank except with art and cultural organizations," she says. When Elaine Hamilton retired as executive director, Katie applied for the job.

She says the highlight of her first year has been working with the entire community on Turtles on the Town, a collaboration between the UAC, the Community Foundation of Collier County and the Conservancy of Southwest Florida. The project involves local artists in embellishing turtle sculptures that will be placed around town. "I have learned much from my fellow organizers, local artists, philanthropists and businesses. It's been fantastic, and the turtles haven't even gone out to the public yet," she says.



Katie is married to Ben Jepson. They have a 10-old son, Erik, and two dogs: Sweetie Pie, a rescue pug, and Pippi, a rescue Jack Russell. |

Talking points with Katie Schweikhardt

**Mentor:** My Dad. When things get rough, he will always be there.

**Something your mom was always right about:** I asked her and she said she is always right — which is true, but her best advice was to bring a sweater. I'm always cold.

**As a kid, what did you want to be when you grew up?** A Weeki Wachee mermaid or the first female president.

**First job:** Selling shoes. It was a great job. I love shoes.

**What would you be doing if you weren't doing this?** I'd probably be practicing law.

**Something that's been on your mind:** The recent budget cuts for arts organizations worries me. Organizations need to know that their funding won't change dramatically year to year. It prohibits growth.

**Guilty pleasures: Margaritas and guacamole.**

**One thing on your bucket list:** Visit Machu Picchu.

**Skill or talent you wish you had:** I'd like to play the concertina. It is undervalued as a musical instrument.

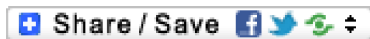
**Something that makes you laugh:** My son's silly jokes. They are atrocious, but he tries hard.

**Last book you read:** Erik Larson's "Dead Wake."

**Something people might be surprised to find out about you:** I didn't believe that snow was real until I was 10. I thought it was just one of those made up things on television. Then I saw snow.

**What are you most proud of?** My family. I gave up a very lucrative profession in order to help others. I could only do this with their support.

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