

Comparative success Museum curator raises interest in history by linking centuries; [FINAL EDITION, NW]

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At first glance, the two worlds Sharon Darling straddles seem completely unrelated.

By day, she talks semiconductors, radios and robotics as director of the Motorola Museum of Electronics in Schaumburg.

At night, she retires to the antique-filled 19th Century farmhouse she shares with husband Mikell on one of St. Charles' fast-disappearing country roads.

What links these worlds?

History.

Nineteenth Century farmhouse-that's clear. What's not so apparent, however, even to most high-tech companies, is that with the obsolescence of product and technology every few months, they're making history at a wildly accelerated pace. By hiring Sharon Darling, Motorola is working to preserve that history.

Mikell Darling, a free-lance museum consultant whose clients have included Montgomery Ward and the Lake Forest-Lake Bluff Historical Society, jokes, "It's a codependency we've developed. We're enablers. We're both addicted to history."

As a child in North Carolina, Sharon's parents took her to historical sites such as Williamsburg and the Smithsonian Institution. But it was summer visits to her grandmother's heirloom-packed house, immersed in her turn-of-the-century girlhood during sweltering storytelling sessions on the porch, that kindled Darling's imagination.

There, she suspects, the biographical approach for which she is known in historical circles first began to take shape.

"I love looking at both sides of the story and examining people's motivations and rationale," said the former curator of decorative and industrial arts at the Chicago Historical Society and whose soft-spoken gentility betrays her Southern upbringing.

("Maybe now that everyone has air conditioning down there, things will be faster and they'll be ruder," she said, laughing.)

By the mid-'70s, the historical society housed few examples of such Chicago-made crafts as furniture, metal, glass and ceramics.

Harold Skramstad, recipient of the National Endowment for the Humanities' Charles Frankel Prize for public service in the humanities, was executive director during much of Darling's tenure. When she took on the job, "she had to build a collection," Skramstad said.

A longtime resident laid down the gauntlet: "There's no Chicago silver. There's nothing worthwhile made in Chicago."

"When someone says something's not possible, I always get intrigued," Darling, 49, said.

The result was her first exhibition, "Chicago Metalsmiths" (1977). In the following seven years, three major exhibitions with catalogs followed, on Chicago ceramics, glass and furniture. (She curated other shows as well, including the popular "Haymarket!")

Skramstad, now president of the Henry Ford Museum at Greenfield Village, calls her contributions, "in a word, extraordinary. Basically, she did major exhibitions and major books on three subjects that nobody had ever done anything about before."

"What fascinated her," said Mikell, "was what the objects represented rather than the objects themselves. Why were they made, who made them and what drove them to create these things?"

In 1984, the Decorative Arts Society awarded her exhibition catalog "Chicago Furniture: Art, Craft & Industry, 1833-1933" the Charles Montgomery Prize for best decorative arts book.

Fannia Weingartner, former head of publications at the Chicago Historical Society and editor of all Darling's books, said: "Sharon's books were seminal in establishing the history of decorative arts in Chicago because she didn't just write about objects, she wrote about how they were produced and the people who produced them."

Darling's ground-breaking work at the historical society earned her spots in Who's Who of American Women and Who's Who in American Art as well as an honorary membership in the American Society of Interior Design.

But the motivation for her non-stop research and writing, according to Weingartner, now a Pittsburgh-based free-lance editor who counts the Motorola Museum among her clients, is "not because she has to, not because it's going to make her famous but because she is genuinely interested in pursuing subjects that take her fancy."

Manufacturing began to capture Darling's fancy while visiting Chicago craftsmen and factories. Not only were the people she interviewed intriguing, but when they told her, "If I don't do a good job at work, this company's out of business," I knew they were right," she said. "It's the concept of survival. I had 250 names of other companies that had gone out of business over 150 years."

When Darling arrived at Motorola in 1986, the museum existed only as an idea in chairman Robert Galvin's mind.

The task, she said, "was showing that we were capable of achieving the standard (he set) and being able to take steps that would fulfill that vision. My job was to work with others to make it reality."

She had absolutely no experience in electronics, the world's largest manufacturing industry.

"I realized one day while I was reading Motorola's annual report I hadn't a clue what a semiconductor was," she said.

At the Chicago Historical Society, Darling said, "I had focused on what people think of as industry but totally ignored this one that was everywhere."

She began at the children's section of her local library: "How many books can I take out?"

"All you want."

She filled a shopping bag with titles such as "Your First Radio" and "What Is a Chip?"

For the first year, she and Jim Spsychalski were the only full-time staff, with a very part-time secretary, Barb Deuel, and Tim Kellogg, on loan for a few hours each week from Motorola's corporate public relations.

The plan, according to Ed Lewis, vice president, corporate director of real estate, was to hire a longtime Motorola employee to run the warehousing of artifacts and another person to develop the museum's conceptual plan and exhibits, then implement them.

With 40-plus years at Motorola, more than half the company's existence, Spsychalski connected Darling with a vast network of longtime employees who provided old products and memorabilia as well as information. Sadly, two years into the project he suffered a stroke.

In the early conceptual phase, there were no restrictions. The number of exhibits and what they should cover, even the museum's size, was up for grabs. That the museum today has 20,000 square feet of exhibit space alone-not to mention offices, auditorium, classroom and archives-in a separate, multimillion-dollar building is due, in no small part, to Darling's guidance.

"It wasn't me," she said emphatically. "It was us."

Researcher Eric Schuster said, "She's the one who persisted and was able to best interpret the vision of the company, the vision of Bob Galvin, in terms of what the museum should be. She was able to get the right people to interpret and build it. Now she's doing the same thing in terms of programs and services. She really is the champion."

"I don't think Tim and I realized what wasn't possible," said Darling. "We didn't stop and look at the limitations, we kept looking at the possibilities. We never said to each other, 'Oh, that's not going to fly.'

"Instead," she said, laughing, "we kept making it larger."

With a team of contractors (researchers, photographers, designers and architects), they planned exhibits and scoured the world for TVs, radios, microchips and memorabilia.

"Many Friday nights, we'd be in the warehouse at 9," she said, "drinking Cokes and coffee and eating pizza, hashing things out.

"Finally, we would go home for a weekend and someone would come back and say, 'It's all wrong, let's look at this again.' And we'd entirely start from scratch.

"There was always this pressure of time, but we thought 'I'd rather work harder and do it over and come up with something that we feel meets the objective of what we're trying to share.' It's wonderful to have a working relationship with a group like that."

By the September 1991 opening day, they counted more than 2,000 people who'd made the museum possible. Since then, the staff of 36 full- and part-timers has welcomed more than 40,000 visitors.

"The museum gives people not only an understanding of the development of Motorola as a corporation," said Ed Lewis, "but the development of electronics. We'll keep updating as long as we're around, which as far as I'm concerned will be forever."

Darling's job has changed.

"The challenge of every day is to make sure every visitor gets a high-quality visit. Running a museum now day-to-day, the idea is to create a team that has a commitment over a longer time," she said. "It's easier to do something once and then go on to something else. Now we have many goals and many projects to balance, and I think it takes a lot more skill and thought. These are skills I'm just now developing.

"You try to be a coach and you try to be a leader and sometimes you have to be a dictator."

"Sharon has learned a lot about becoming a manager of a large activity and has this uncanny ability to get people to work together," said Lewis. "A lot of people can be good managers, but they can't do that and she has it in spades."

In January she will enter the executive MBA program at Northwestern University in Evanston.

Current projects include developing a video about the company history for Motorola facilities and community groups, an illustrated Motorola history book and an archive of videotaped interviews with senior executives.

In a pilot project with the DePaul Graduate School of Commerce, the museum is used as a three-dimensional textbook.

One of Darling's major goals for the museum is to demonstrate how a corporation can make an impact on both education and museums. Motorola has entered into partnerships with nearby school districts to rewrite the junior high electronics curriculum, including museum visits.

Museum tour guides have developed special tours with activity carts tailored to the students' shorter attention spans.

The staff describes the process using the language of business: creating a "product" to "satisfy customers."

They're not just being cute. Darling hopes this approach will have far-reaching effects. She aims to show the museum community how to incorporate such business principles as reaching for excellence, total customer satisfaction, value added and how to evaluate a project.

"It's been a wonderful opportunity for me to be sort of a hybrid, to have a foot in both worlds. Some people could say you don't fit in either one," she said, laughing.

But then she has spent much of her life as an anomaly, for neither the museum profession nor high-tech has been particularly friendly to ambitious women.

Darling attended North Carolina State University in Raleigh after learning that the University of North Carolina wouldn't admit women until junior year.

"I was one of the first women at N.C. State," she said. "There were 50 women and 5,000 men, so when I came to Motorola it didn't bother me.

"Last year I went to a conference of the American Association of Museums where they had a breakfast for women directors. They said there still is a glass ceiling, but the fact that we're sitting here in this room—we wouldn't have been here 10 years ago because there were almost no women directors."

Even so, Darling doesn't necessarily see herself as a trailblazer: "I think I'm in the generation who are the second wave of pioneers. We've made it easier, opened more doors for the women who are younger than we are. On the other hand, I was able to step into this job because there were already women here. I was hired by Toni Dewey (then-head of corporate public relations), the first female officer of Motorola."

Since joining Motorola, she has continued to cultivate her interest in the arts.

"I like to have a hobby or a project at home that I can focus on," Darling said.

She has written articles on Chicago's architectural terra cotta (photographed by Mikell), and in 1989 she published "Teco: Art Pottery of the Prairie School" for the Erie, Pa., art museum. She also has contributed to an upcoming catalog for the Indianapolis Museum of Art retrospective exhibition on metalsmith Janet Payne Boyles.

For the last three years, one of the most absorbing projects she and her husband have taken on is their home, which they discovered when a friend asked if they'd take a look at it in terms of whether it was worth restoring.

"We just thought it was the most wonderful house we'd ever seen," said Sharon. "They'd had some tenants, and they didn't know what they should do with it. We solved their problem by buying it."

Constructed in 1844 by Scottish immigrant Walter Wilson, the house replaced a log cabin the farmers had lived in for 10 years on the back of the lot.

The Wilsons also had a brick business-their clay pit is still visible-and made all the bricks for their new home.

"It's one of the few surviving brick Greek Revivals-it's actually more Federalist-in Kane County and it was built so early," said Mikell, who served as executive director of the Evanston Historical Society for 20 years. "It's rather high style for a small farmhouse."

"We've had a great time doing research on it and writing up the historical documents and taking pictures," said Sharon.

Through their efforts, the farmhouse has been named a Kane County landmark, and they're working to get it listed on the National Register of Historic Places.

"There's so much development in the area, I think it's important to try to preserve some of these old farmsteads," said Sharon. "There are a lot of old houses in St. Charles, but people don't know about the ones in the country."

They're also working to maintain its excellent state of preservation.

"It's in such good mechanical shape. We don't have some of the basic problems that one might find in older homes," said Mikell, "but the inside had been altered radically around the turn of the century.

"Our major goal is to restore the interior to its original configuration, and we're adding on a compatible porch or a pavilion, which has been approved by the Kane County Landmarks Commission."

While renovating the yard and the house, the Darlings started a "window sill museum" with found fragments of 19th Century St. Charles medicine bottles and bits of Staffordshire china.

"That set me off on a new collecting hunt," said Sharon, who did some research and learned that their Staffordshire pattern is Siam, which, like the house, dates from the 1840s.

"Although those shards could have come from anyone who lived in the house at any time," said Sharon, "it's fun to have those little bits of history."

CAPTION:

PHOTO (color): Sharon Darling at Motorola Museum of Electronics in Schaumburg. Photo by John Dziekan.

CAPTION:

PHOTO: Embracing history, Sharon and Mikell Darling live in a home that was once a 19th Century farmhouse. Tribune photos by John Dziekan.

CAPTION:

PHOTO: Their goal, says Mikell at home with Sharon, "is to restore the interior to its original configuration."

CAPTION:

PHOTO: Sharon, with one of her collections, says, "it's fun to have those little bits of history."

[Illustration]

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