

Zastrow retiring after two decades as fair secretary

By Lydia Statz, Union staff writer | Posted: Friday, January 24, 2014 8:57 am

Gail Zastrow has seen — and done — it all.

But after 20 years of planning, coordinating and acting as the Jefferson County Fair's go-to person, the Fair Park administrative secretary will be hanging up her walkie-talkie Monday.

She started the job on July 13, 1994, the first day of the county fair, jumping right in since her predecessor was transferring to another department at the end of the fair.

“So that was fun,” she recalled. “I probably didn't realize the extent of the job until the fair of 1995. Sink or swim time!”

Many would have been overwhelmed after a first day like that, but not Zastrow. After all, it was not her first day at the fairgrounds.

“My girls were in 4-H, I was in 4-H, we always came to the fair, so when the job came up, I just said, ‘it might be a good fit,’” she said.

Zastrow grew up in Cook County, Ill., exhibiting at the county fair along with her sister.

Interestingly, she and her family traveled many summers to the Wisconsin State Fair, since West Allis made a much closer trip than Springfield.

Later, when she and her husband, Bob, were operating a farm in Jefferson County, her daughters, Jennifer and Julie, enjoyed exhibiting with 4-H, bringing her to the Jefferson County Fair year after year. Once she found herself working there, however, Zastrow got the real behind-the-scenes look at how the county's “big show” was put together.

In the early years, her tiny office at Fair Park, a two-car garage on a cement slab, lacked heat or air conditioning. That left her hauling everything from the fairgrounds back over to another office at the courthouse as soon as the fair was over.

She stayed in that tiny office until 2002, when Fair Park renovations finally moved the administrative offices into the Fair Park Activity Center yearround.

That was only one of the major changes to the fairgrounds that she's seen throughout the years.

In her early years, paved roads, sidewalks, streetlights and fencing was added around the park's border, along with improvements to the electrical, sewer and water systems. A new dairy barn

with milking parlor was built and a horse barn with 94 additional stalls, and additional restrooms and a new food building joined “food row.”

That first round of improvements finished just days before the fair opened in July 1998.

Then, a new poultry and rabbit barn were added, along with an addition to the Activity Center, a second outdoor arena now used by the draft horses. More recently, Zastrow witnessed construction of the Commercial Building, another outdoor arena, and additional campsites, along with many other, less visible, infrastructural improvements.

All of these changes have helped the fair stay up-to-date as the county changed throughout the years.

“When I started, we had maybe 15 food vendors. Now there’s 25 or 30. There are very few people left farming still in this county, so you have to actively look for people to exhibit. People used to just come to the fair. Now you have to convince them why they should.” said Zastrow.

“And horses are such a big thing now. We used to have fewer horses and more dairy, and now it is reversed and we have to cut it off at about 150 horses, because that’s all we have room for without adding a tent. So we’ve had to kind of adjust as the county’s changed. You have to stay relevant.”

And it would appear Zastrow’s helped them do just that. For the past two years, the fair has set overall attendance records, topping out at 47,537 for its five-day run in 2013.

Those numbers probably were helped by the beautiful weather, which appeared to be giving Zastrow a nice sendoff for her final fair.

“2013 was the first year that we did not have any rain during the five days of fair, ever in my 20 years,” she said. “We’ve had heat. We’ve had cold. I remember one year where it was 105 and my office was the only place with air conditioning, and we had several little kids in there with EMTs giving them water and trying to cool them down.”

As the fair primarily is an outdoor event, it always has been subject to Mother Nature’s whims, but the experience that jumps to the forefront of Zastrow’s mind is the 2008 county fair, held just after the record-setting flooding that devastated the area and closed Jefferson’s bridges, splitting the city in two.

“In 2008, they opened Highway 26 so you could get to the fairgrounds on the Monday of the fair. They opened the road at 10:30 and we started judging at noon,” she said. “That was a scary time, because the Emergency Management Department was using all of our facilities that spring for staging. And if we wanted to get to the UW-Extension office for anything, we had to drive almost to Lake Mills to get there, because they were on the other side of the river.”

Later that year, during the fair, wind blew down one of the entertainment tents, but quick action helped to set it right, because, “the fair must go on, and it does.”

It’s no secret that the most anticipated part of each year’s fair are the headlining entertainment acts on Friday and Saturday nights, but Zastrow almost never has had time to sit and enjoy one of the shows. Behind the scenes, she and the rest of the fair’s staff and volunteers usually are busy making sure everyone’s where they need to be, dealing with technological meltdowns and, sometimes, fulfilling strange requests by the performers.

“Oh yes, there have been some weird requests. Only wanting blue M&Ms, peanut-butter-and-jelly sandwiches with the crust cut off, things like that,” said Zastrow. “None of them have left me starstruck, because it’s just part of the job.”

But throughout the years, her favorite part of the fair has been the youth education aspect, sometimes seen through the eyes of children who never have stepped foot on a farm.

“In 2002, my daughter (now a teacher) was doing her diversity training at the university at a place called the Milwaukee Rescue Mission, and she worked with their staff and the fair so that if the kids earned their fieldtrip, that Friday they could come to the fair,” Zastrow explained. “They’ve been doing it every year since. And it’s been great. We let them come for free, through sponsorship, and many of these kids would have probably never seen an animal in their lives.”

A program like that is near and dear to Zastrow’s heart.

“Way back when, I wanted to be a teacher and just never got there. So the youth program have always been my favorite part of the fair,” she said. “The things the kids learn by participating in 4-H and being able to present what they did, I just think it’s a wonderful learning experience. And learning about agriculture is such a great thing, and so necessary.”

The fair has continued to be a Zastrow family tradition, with both of her daughters, Jennifer Mitchell and Julie Kiedrowski, returning every year to work at the fair, both providing both much-needed support during her busiest time of the year.

“It’s wonderful because they know what to do,” Zastrow said. “They’ve come up through 4-H and they come back every year, so I can just point them in the right direction and they get it done. Unfortunately with a lot of other people, since fair is only a week, by the time you get them trained, they’re done.

“And I always like when young people come back to work at the fair, because they do know what fair is and have participated before, while other kids may have to learn everything.”

Retirement will give Zastrow more time for tractor pulling, something she and her husband have been involved in for 14 years; boating on the Rock River; and spending more time on their grain farm and with their children and grandchildren.

Plus, Zastrow said, she's looking forward to actually being able to enjoy attending the fair for the first time in two decades.

Although she likely won't be a visible presence at the Jefferson County Fair this summer, she won't be a stranger around the fairgrounds in the future, especially since she'll be a 4-H grandma next year.

"I'll be back. You can't keep me away from the fair," she said. "It gets in your blood."

A retirement reception for Zastrow, including cake and refreshments, will be held at the Jefferson County Fair Park Activity Center on Monday, Jan. 27, from 3:30 to 5 p.m. Everyone who would like to wish her a happy retirement is welcome to attend.