

NORTHLAND

Neighbors

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Presidential Family*



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Cover Photo by Natalie Carver



Meet the Gundersons: Parkville's Presidential Family

BY NIKKI SWARTZ
PHOTOS BY NATALIE CARVER

Laurie and Greg Gunderson met on the Millard South High School debate team in 1982. Thirty-eight years later, Laurie says they're still arguing.

The only difference is that now they spar from "the White House," the 100-year-old presidential residence on the Park University campus. This vantage point gives Laurie and Greg, who is president of Park University, a spectacular view of English Landing Park and the majestic Missouri River, an old train depot that is now an art studio, and Downtown Parkville.

The Gundersons are no strangers to the Midwest. Greg is a native of Omaha, Nebraska, and Laurie was born in Cedar Rapids, Iowa. After graduating from high school in Omaha, the couple attended different colleges and were briefly separated by a three-hour drive across I-80 in Nebraska.

Greg attended the University of Nebraska-Omaha on a full-tuition scholarship and lived at home during his undergraduate years. Laurie

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attended the University of Nebraska-Kearney, where she had full tuition and room and board.

"When I first left for college, I was despondent without Greg," she said. "But those college years turned out to be so much fun, and the friends I made in college are still close friends today."

After graduation, Greg took an accounting job in Minneapolis. Laurie graduated a semester early so they could get married in December of 1988. Laurie graduated with a bachelor's degree in English and speech, and then earned her Juris Doctorate from the University of Minnesota Law School. Meanwhile, Greg worked full-time while also working toward his MBA in finance. Once he earned that, he began working on his doctorate in academic administration.

In January 2016, Greg was appointed the 17th president of Park University by the Board of Trustees. He had served as vice president and chief financial officer at Webster University in St. Louis from 2011 to 2016. Prior to Webster, he had spent nine years at the University of Nebraska-Lincoln in various business administrative roles.

When he took the position at Park, Greg said: "It's exceedingly clear that

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for 140 years, Park University has embraced a willingness to innovate that has positioned it ahead of the curve in higher education in a manner its peers should envy. I look forward to building on Park's national leadership and extraordinarily proud heritage."

Along the way, Greg and Laurie added two boys to the family. David and Jack always kept their parents busy by participating in scouting, sports and other activities.

Currently, David is 23 and lives in St. Louis. He graduated last spring from Webster University and is set to begin a graduate program in clinical psychology. He is also a talented musician and actor. He and his longtime girlfriend, Niki, acted together in high school.

Jack is 21 and is a Park University student. He studies criminal justice and is an Eagle Scout, an avid guitar player and a video editor. During the pandemic, Jack picked up a new hobby: He has become a devoted walker, walking anywhere between five and 10 miles each day.

Rounding out the Gunderson family is Griffin, their six-year-old fluffy white Bichon Frise. Laurie says he loves his family and serves as the unofficial Park University mascot.

"He greets everyone with wild barking and kisses," she said. "Despite daily walks, he has put on a couple pandemic pounds but is so happy that the family is eating so many meals at home."

With both Greg and Laurie devoting so much time to Park University, it might seem challenging to find time for each other. When asked how their marriage works when they're both so busy, Laurie gives Greg all the credit.

"Our marriage works so well because Greg always gives more than he takes," she said. "He's a great husband and father, and he is the hardest working person I know."

A View From Parkville's White House

The family moved to Parkville from St. Louis about four and a half years ago when Greg was appointed president of Park University. The Gundersons are Parkville transplants but have grown to love their adopted home.



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“We love so much about the Northland! Being situated between downtown Kansas City and the KCI airport is ideal for business reasons, and having picturesque downtown Parkville and English Landing almost at our doorstep is perfect,” Laurie said. “We love the mix of people in the Northland; some folks have lived here their entire lives and many others, like us, are transplants who find the sense of small-town community familiar and comforting. And we are energized on a daily basis by our college students, who hail from all over the world. They definitely keep us young.”

The Gundersons consider themselves fortunate to live right on the Park University campus, with a stunning view English Landing Park and the river in the front and a view of the majestic, castle-like Mackay Hall in their backyard. Laurie appreciates the beauty of the campus grounds year-round.

“My favorite month is April when something new comes into bloom nearly every day,” she explained. “In the fall, we enjoy seeing Northland families come to campus to have family pictures taken during autumn’s burst of color. And the Parkville Nature Sanctuary adjacent to campus is truly a gem in the Northland, too.”

Greg and Laurie have jumped in feet first to give their time and talents to the Parkville community. “We both enjoy being part of the Parkville Rotary, which is focused on doing good for the Northland community and the world. The Rotary supports local food banks and Harvesters, provides college scholarships to high school seniors, collects shoes for people in other countries and is helping to completely eradicate polio,” Laurie said. “I am a co-sponsor for the Rotary’s young adult arm, the Rotaracts, whose motto is ‘Service Above Self.’ They focus on service projects, too.”

Laurie also serves on the board for the Platte County Community Center South YMCA, which offers so many great services to the community, including swimming lessons, art classes, afterschool and summer programs for kids, and Silver Sneaker classes.

She calls herself an “ambassador” for Park University. She helps run the Pirate Pantry, a food bank for Park students, and volunteers in any way needed. On occasion, you might catch her teaching a freshman seminar or Introduction to Public Speaking. Laurie is a lifelong St. Louis Cardinals fan, and sees no problem with also being a loyal supporter of the KC Royals.

Greg is a frequent attendee and speaker at meetings for local business organizations, including the Parkville Chamber of Commerce and the Economic Development Council. As a lifelong fan of President Harry S. Truman, Greg is thrilled to serve on the Board of Directors for the Truman Library. He also serves on the boards for the KC Chamber of Commerce and for the Higher Learning Commission (HLC), the regional accrediting agency for higher education. In June, Greg was elected by his peers to serve a one-year term as president of the Independent Colleges and Universities of Missouri. In his spare time, Greg enjoys woodworking. He creates writing pens, dollhouses and clocks. He also loves the sport of curling.

The Gunderson family frequently vacations with extended family at a

place called Pehrson Lodge on Lake Vermilion in northern Minnesota. Greg said his dad grew up in Eveleth, Minnesota, and his parents have vacationed near there every Fourth of July for more than 45 years. The family also enjoys visiting the Smoky Mountains near Gatlinburg, Tennessee, with Laurie’s extended family.

Greg’s career has taken them all over the world, but the family’s favorite spot is Alaska.

“We were there in July for the salmon spawning and the whales returning,” Greg said. “We saw eagles on every lamp post in Juneau, and we could see and hear great chunks of ice breaking off icebergs from a mile away. ‘Majestic’ isn’t a big enough word for the enormity and beauty of Alaska.”

Community During COVID-19

Since David and Jack were little, Laurie said the Gunderson family motto has been: “Enjoy the little things, for one day you may look back and realize they were the big things.” That philosophy is more true today than ever before with everything that’s going on in the world, she said.

For example, the Gunderson family has really grown to love and appreciate the Parkville community, and Laurie said she gets a bit teary-eyed thinking about all their wonderful neighbors and community during the pandemic.

“This pandemic has really brought into focus how important the people in our community really are to us,” she said. “I miss the simplest of interactions. I miss chatting with our favorite servers at Stone Canyon and Nick and Jake’s. I miss Maria, Griffin’s groomer at Petcetera. I miss the lady at Pride Cleaners, the folks in the post office, and saying hello to our students working at Price Chopper and HyVee. Greg misses his fellow morning swimmers at the YMCA. Jack misses his co-workers at Stone Canyon where he was a dishwasher. If there is anything good to come out of this pandemic, perhaps it is that we value the people in our community in a much deeper way.”

Greg and Laurie encourage their fellow Northlanders to stay strong and be good to themselves and to one another during this challenging time.

Photos submitted by the Gunderson family



“The amount of stress being experienced by each of us individually and by our community as a whole is significant. Our community’s leaders are making incredibly difficult decisions about how to best keep people safe, how to deal with civil unrest, how to keep businesses open and people employed,” Greg said. “We need to show grace to each other and ourselves, believing in our hearts that everyone is doing the very best they can.”

That’s something Greg and Laurie definitely agree on. They plan to take that advice to heart each day as they continue to lead Park University and serve as leaders in the greater Northland community.

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