



Don Campbell / HP staff

Mollie Waller is the executive director of Youth Solutions Inc., in Benton Harbor.

Challenges and opportunities

Waller makes connections as Youth Solutions executive director

By **JULIANA KNOT**
HP Staff Writer

The challenges of Mollie Waller's work are also the opportunities.

Waller has been with Youth Solutions Inc. for three years and was named executive director of the statewide organization last month.

The group helps connect young people to tools and resources that allow them to stay engaged with their education.

Waller sat down with Herald-Palladium Staff Writer Juliana Knot to talk about her path to the job, the work she does and her stint driving the Oscar Mayer Weinermobile.

Trace your path since (Marquette University), from graduation to here. What brought you to Youth Solutions?

The most interesting thing about how I arrived at Youth Solutions is because of the compilation of my background. So I have a background in marketing and communications, as well as nonprofit fund development and nonprofit management. My very first job out of college was driving the

Q & A MOLLIE WALLER

Oscar Meyer Weinermobile – which I have a million puns: we brought miles of smiles to people. We tried to “ketchup” with people across the nation. Should I go on or should I stop?

We're going to talk more about that.

And then from there, I worked for two state-level nonprofits in Southeast Michigan, and that was wonderful to hone the fund development skills and the marketing, communications, event management.

And from there, I had a beautiful 16-year career working for America's dairy farmers, and that used all the skills I had developed and enhanced them even more. I was working in an affiliated structure, where we had 19-member organizations for the company that I worked for, and when Youth Solutions was looking for a deputy director at the time, they were looking for some-

one who had done marketing, communications, fund development and experience in an affiliate structure. So it was pretty unique, and I think it was the right place, right time, and my prior experience has led me here.

Going forward, what do you see as some of the biggest challenges and some of the biggest opportunities?

I love that question. For Youth Solutions, we are on a growth trajectory and have been for a few years, because the need is so great. So the challenge is, how do you continue to meet the need, and how do you continue to find the young people that have disconnected from education and employment due to the pandemic.

There's always a certain number of young people who disconnect each year, usually around 10,000 in Michigan. During the pandemic, 45,000 disconnected ... So our challenge and our

opportunity is to reconnect them to education and help prepare them for a career with a family-sustaining wage. We recently finished a five-year strategic plan, actually just finished the first year of implementing it, and so for us, the keys to our success: partners, we've never worked alone; we never will, look at where can we expand and deepen the services that we offer and how can we better diversify our funding and build a trusted brand. Those are our three goals.

But the secret sauce to Youth Solutions is our premiere program called Jobs for Michigan's Graduates. This is where we support over 3,500 young people every single year with the skills they need to be ready for a career, but also to learn about different careers.

Often times, disadvantaged young folks aren't aware of the range of high-demand jobs here in Michigan, and so we're working to expand their awareness and understanding. And then, find an opportunity for them to pursue it. Maybe it's after graduation going to a two-year

See **WALLER**, page A6

WALLER

From page A1

college, maybe it's a four-year, maybe it's a credential, straight to a credential.

Working with the youth to help them find their place is what's going to help address Michigan's long-term labor issues, and the most important people in all of that are our specialists. They are the ones who work directly with the young people every day. Highlighting them on a daily basis isn't highlighting them enough.

During the pandemic, I heard stories that they talked to young folks at 2 in the morning if that's when that young person needed it, pouring their time and effort into making sure folks had basic services, while helping them stay engaged in their education.

The specialists around the state are absolutely top-notch people, very, very good at what they do and some of the most dedicated people I've come across.

When you, your specialists are talking to young people, what are the roadblocks that often lead them to disconnecting, whether it's from work or education?

Great question. The average young person that comes to our Jobs for Michigan's Graduates program has six different barriers: economic barriers, lack of a support system at home. They may have been or are in the foster care system. Some have academic deficiencies, transportation issues of getting to school, and I think you put peer pressure in there.

So what we do is try to pro-

vide a sense of purpose and belonging: give that a young person a grounding and help them grow in everything they can be, because each person is so special.

Is there a moment that stands out to you in the last three years? That's like, "This is why I do this."

There are so many. Most recently, yesterday: we do a series of youth-based conversations, lifting the voice of our youth, and it's called, "Coffee with a Purpose."

And we've tackled youth issues from racial barriers, mental health issues. Yesterday, our topic was non-traditional careers, and there were three young folks, one pursuing welding, one pursuing construction and the third one is pursuing (a career path as an) auto mechanic. All ladies, in traditionally male-dominated fields.

And in listening to how they approached being a unique person in pursuing this field, they had to overcome some family concerns; they needed to overcome being the only female in the class and having the rest of the class embrace that. Listening to their stories was big.

I think the other two that really stand out: there's a young woman from a few years ago, that is one of the most articulate communicators I have ever met. She was our youth of the year, and she talked about the labels that people would put on her simply by looking at her, and how she worked to overcome those labels. So she graduated, she has since graduated from Southwest Michigan College with a degree in communications, and now she's deciding what's

next for her.

She gave a speech at an event that we had and moved the audience to tears, simply by talking about the emotional struggles that having labels put on you can do, but that she knew because of her JMG specialist, because of the people that she surrounded herself with through the program, she found her sense of purpose and belonging. She excelled in school. She graduated, and she said, "I'm not gonna let anybody else put labels on me. I'm going to define the labels."

So that one stood out, and the third one is a young man from Detroit, who had never been outside of his neighborhood, until joining JMG, which is what we call Jobs for Michigan's Graduates, and he went to Washington, D.C. First time on an airplane.

And his specialist ran the town with him. He wanted to see every monument. And he was able to attend a leadership conference. When they got back, she drove him home, and he said, "Same old neighborhood, same old house."

She thought to herself, "I never want him to feel 'same old neighborhood, same old house' again." This young man graduated from school and started in a pre-apprenticeship program with DTE Energy. He was accepted because of his performance in the internship or the pre-apprenticeship, and DTE is having him follow their Pathways Program at Henry Ford Community College. Once he graduates, he'll be an employee of DTE, and in five years, he'll be a journeyman.

And he came from a back-

ground where there was high crime rate, not a lot of resources, his mom is supportive but she is limited in her support with all the other siblings.

Those are three stories that just rip at my heart, but it also serves as an inspiration and a motivation. Because if they have overcome a lot, then I can overcome anything, and everyone that we meet can end up like (those stories).

I think people are going to want to know. You got to tell them about the Weinermobile.

Sure, I would be happy to! Driving the Oscar Meyer Weinermobile was an absolute career honor, and to have that so early in my career, I still look back and say, "Okay, that was a pretty cool thing."

We brought so much joy to people. The timeframe when I did this was the very, very late 1980s, so the video camcorders were the giant things that sit on your shoulder. We'd be on an interstate, and people would pass us, and then they would want us to pass them, and then they would want to switch lanes. And they wanted to get every angle.

Smiles, waves, honks – you just brought such joy to people. It inspired and moved my heart, and I also knew that I was doing something that they will remember forever. I was a part of their vacations, and they will reminisce on it. Bringing joy to people is a big part. I have always had a servant heart. I enjoy helping.

Different than nonprofit help, but it was bringing them joy, and that's helping.

Contact: jknot@TheHP.com, 932-0360, Twitter: @knotjuliana