

# wisconsin Trails

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- [In This Issue](#)
- [Multimedia](#)

## A Wisconsin Welcome

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By Mary Bergin

Within an hour of meeting Stephanie Klett, the state's tourism secretary, we're climbing the stairs at her Beloit childhood home and examining a recent family portrait. She points to her brother Fred and says, with a gust of enthusiasm: "Look at his ears - aren't they big?"

Not exactly the conversation you'd expect during a first-time interview with one of the governor's 14 Cabinet members, but this is no born-again politician or conformist. The 17-year host of *Discover Wisconsin* did not relinquish her spunk, sense of humor or quick-witted candor when her new job began in January.

"She wakes up, turns on the electricity, and it doesn't go off," says her mother, Joanne Klett, who is not surprised by Stephanie's career success because "I believe in strong women."

"I tried to be laid back and shy, but it wasn't working for me," the daughter acknowledges. She describes her parents as compatible opposites, crediting "padre" Fred Klett for her drive and discipline and her mother for instilling a sense of free-spiritedness. That combination produced a pageant queen, the 1992 Miss Wisconsin, but Klett has been a lifelong standout, the second youngest and only daughter in a family of 10 kids. In the family picture, the guys wear navy but her blazer is white.

She understands what it means to fight and be blessed. A few years ago, Klett was diagnosed with transverse myelitis, a spinal cord inflammation that usually results in severe debilitation or total loss of mobility. Klett suffered only partial and temporary paralysis.

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We spend six hours together touring her hometown of Beloit, where she still lives. "It's a fantastic place to visit and often overlooked - the city is invigorated," she says. Wherever we go, she's as likely to be greeted with a hug as a hello.

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unsurprised and banter with Klett like she's a favorite daughter.

Then we return to her spotless ranch home ("I love to clean," she confesses), where the walls feature paintings by lesser-known, rural Wisconsin artists. On the mantle is her 2010 Emmy - in the category of Individual Excellence on Camera - for her role in hosting *Discover Wisconsin*. The winning travelogue took her from the pumpkin boat regatta in Nekoosa ("one of the oddest things I've ever done") to Viroqua's Wild West Days ("when you hang with cowboys, you just feel cool"). Now she seeks, defines and showcases Wisconsin's character in other ways.

"It's a serious business but we're having fun doing it," says Dave Fantle, second-in-command at the Department of Tourism. Klett refers to him as "Deputy Dave," and he does not object. "We have a lot of laughs and commonalities," Fantle says. "We finish each other's sentences - it feels a little like George (Burns) and Gracie (Allen) sometimes."

Klett comes up with odd slogans to amuse and motivate her 24-person staff (example: "So are you an Ameri-CAN or an Ameri-CAN'T?"), but won't introduce a new slogan for Wisconsin. "We've had five in 15 years," she says. "Who are we, really, once you go through them like water?"

She prefers to spend her \$9.9 million marketing budget on holistic and targeted pursuits such as Native American cultural tourism and believes tourism's success is rooted in customer service. "It's so important to treat people like they matter, because they do," she says. Lessons in customer service will be distributed statewide in DVD and CD format. "Tourism is about enjoying a day or a week away - if we treat people well, they won't forget it," Klett believes.

The new secretary also sidesteps politics when boosting Wisconsin tourism. "I don't care if you're a conservative in one of our hotels, a democrat on our water slides or an independent on our hiking trails," she says, because her department's job is to welcome everybody.

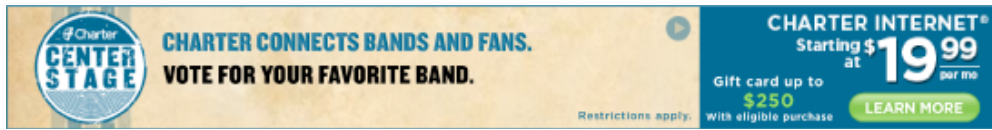
"We all have differences of opinions," she notes, and it's in the world's best interest to connect positively with "personalities that are different than your own."

*Mary Bergin of Madison has written a syndicated travel column since 2002; the archives keep growing at [roadstraveled.com](http://roadstraveled.com).*

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