

Jayne Sorrels



A Life of Service

History is shaped by individuals with a driving desire to make a change. If we're lucky, that change makes the world a better place. Jayne Sorrels of Boise, Idaho, is one of those people. She's spent her life and career losing herself in finding the best in others.

By Jon Lamoreaux

Photo by Kevin Kiernan

Before becoming one of the founders and the executive director of Boise's Interfaith Sanctuary, an overnight shelter for homeless men, women and children, in 2005, Sorrels found ways to merge her two lifelong passions — the arts and human rights — to help others. She first worked with troubled youth, and then started a prison ministry. In her present role and through her dedication to human rights, she has positively impacted the lives of hundreds of people marginalized by society.

Here to Serve

"My understanding of life is that we are all here to serve," Sorrels says. "As time has progressed I've come to understand that we are all connected, all part of the wholeness, and so it is our responsibility to care for one another."

Sorrels' life story goes back to Saratoga Springs, New York, where she grew up and attended college. After studying liberal arts and comparative religions at Empire State College, she uprooted and headed west to Boise, Idaho, in 1986 with her then husband and settled down to start a family. Ironically, the life she has now began when the marriage ended. She found herself in a city she didn't know with three kids and no plan.

"This was the beginning of my own struggle," Sorrels says. "I had to lean on others and who knew then how much that would help me now."

An experience she had at age 8 awakened her innate humanitarian instincts.

"My grandmother worked for a Roman Catholic Monsignor in Poughkeepsie, New York, and one time while I was staying with her she fed me a bowl of hot prunes for breakfast," Sorrels says. "While I was trying to find a way not to eat them, the Monsignor came in and began telling me about the struggles he had growing up in Poland and how his whole family would feed off old, crusty bread that he and his brother would find in garbage piles. I couldn't imagine anyone living like this, and my heart opened deeply."

Making a Career Out of Serving

When forced by circumstance to find a job, it's not surprising Sorrels began her career as the youth-at-risk project director for the Idaho Commission on the Arts in 1992. Under the guidance of her mentor, Executive Director Margot Knight, Sorrels implemented her idea of pairing artists of all disciplines with first-time status juvenile offenders. She hoped to prove that an outlet for their creativity could teach the teens better coping skills. She was right.

"Creative kids are the ones getting into trouble because they learn in different ways," Sorrels says. "It was compelling for the kids to see people who made a living doing art. When they would engage in art they would start feeling good about themselves, which leads to kids seeing their parents be proud of them for the first time in their lives."

After the Idaho Commission of the Arts, she served in various capacities with the Boise YMCA, the Boise City Arts Commission and the Interfaith Alliance of Idaho before helping to create the Interfaith Sanctuary. Now in its ninth year, the sanctuary is the culmination of her past work experiences, the hardships in her life, and her humanitarian feelings beginning with the day she stared sadly at a bowl of hot prunes.

"My own heart has been broken innumerable times, and I know that I'm a more loving and compassionate person because of this," Sorrels says. "To others looking to find similar fulfillment, I say, 'Ask yourself what breaks your heart and then find a place to serve. Just begin.'" ❁