

A portrait of Susan McConnell, a woman with blonde hair and glasses, resting her chin on her hand. The text "Honoring Susan McConnell" is overlaid in large white font, and "FOUNDER OF LET IT BE US" is in smaller white font below it.

Honoring Susan McConnell

FOUNDER OF LET IT BE US

BY **LISA STAMOS** | PHOTOGRAPHY BY **LINDA M. BARRETT**

Find the Open Door

Some people assume that extroverts make better leaders. Susan McConnell's quiet, still-waters-run-deep management style proves that wrong. Add to that her entrepreneurial, can-do spirit. Then, note her education and training and you've found a one-of-a-kind person who navigates the world with grace, yet drives fabulous results. Her founding of the nonprofit "Let It Be Us" is changing the world. She is also pursuing a doctoral degree in social work. "I've traded in evenings with Netflix to earn a doctorate," she said.

Susan earned a business degree and an MBA from DePaul with a focus on human resources. Working through college as a typist for a law firm, she secured a job in human resources at a law firm after college. She met Doug McConnell, her

husband, at the Barrington train station while commuting.

Susan and Doug worked hard to create their beloved family, as at the time, adoptive children were not visible. Their eldest, biological son was just married. Their three other children came to their family through adoption. "I needed that nucleus," Susan said. "My family is my source of strength and love." For two of their adopted children, Susan and Doug located the birth mothers and for the first, Susan was her labor coach. Their second child was found through a Christmas card campaign. Their third, a daughter, is an inter-family adoption. The family loves to spend time together in Martha's Vineyard. "It's a place with dirt roads, and no TV or internet to distract us," she said.

Susan enjoys working. She started the first woman-owned photography studio in Barrington. Her first two clients were the State of Illinois, and Quintessential Barrington. The

state found her through a search to source a photographer for its Heart Gallery to showcase children available for adoption. “Photos increase a child’s chance of adoption by 50%,” she said.

In Let It Be Us, Susan has brilliantly combined her knowledge, technology, and recruiting methodologies to create the first such entity of its kind. The once-invisible foster child now has a chance. Parents who wish to adopt are offered a pathway. Let It Be Us connects everyone. “I’m working on a Capstone Project now to address Permanency for Children in Foster Care,” she says.

Does anything scare Susan? No, she says. “Obstacles don’t scare me. If one door closes, I just move to find an open door.” Does the pain of seeing so many children in desperate need of a home, a parent, love, and resources weigh her down? No, she says. “It just makes me want to work harder.

HERE ARE SOME WORDS THAT OTHERS SHARED ABOUT **SUSAN MCCONNELL**

Tom Burns, MENTOR

Susan is a unique and wonderful blend of big heart, entrepreneurial spirit, passion and dedication to her cause, and tireless energy to make a difference in the lives of forgotten children in Illinois. Her entrepreneurial spirit has led to creative programming and innovative use of technology from sophisticated databases to social media to webinars. Her commitment and tireless energy often lead to burning the late-night oil to find a bed in a stable home for a child DCFS can’t place. Susan’s volunteerism fills her “spare time” with service in Springfield on four statewide advisory councils. Susan sharing a story of rescuing a child and finding a loving family often has us in tears. It is a joy and inspiration to know and work with Susan McConnell!

Sharon Cobb, FRIEND

Susan McConnell: Confidant. Sister. Broad thinker. Problem solver. Creative force. A forever friend. We met when we joined the Barrington Newcomers group in 1988 and our firstborn sons were infants. We bonded and our sons became close friends. Our families grew through new births and in Susan’s case, adoptions. We celebrated life’s moments. I knew when I met Susan that we would be friends forever! Her creativity simply astounded me. She makes things happen. Her goals were big. Her heart was bigger.

As a project, Susan started a “Heart Gallery” of images of children waiting to be adopted. Her art drew her into the world of foster children. We have high hopes for our own children. Yet, some children do not even have a home with safety and stability. Susan is a treasure, a rare, beautiful friend!

Anne Lee, FRIEND

Susan is someone you want to know. “Boundless” defines her. She is infinite in her ambition, joy, zest, creative power, enthusiasm, unending love, and caring. Susan is unafraid. She believes that anything is possible to achieve within a person or an organization. Susan has the ability to make things happen. Photographer, writer, founder of Let It Be Us, working on her doctorate, gardening, being there for her family—always evolving. And the “wind beneath her wings?” Her husband Doug, who is Susan’s best friend, cheerleader, teammate, love of her life.

Susan makes me laugh, cry, wonder, listen, smile, and I always leave her

saying, “Susan is such a character!” She’s interesting, unusual, unique, amusing, original, likeable, someone you don’t forget. I treasure the times we have celebrated life together. Her home is a haven for all, and her heart is hallowed ground for the many foster children looking for forever homes. I stand in awe of Susan’s will as it finds a way. Susan knows who she is and has the courage to be that person.

Ashley McConnell, DAUGHTER

My mother Susan has always put others before herself. She takes care of the ones she loves with everything she has in her, every day. She loves to support whoever she can with what she has and always strives to uplift others with her determined and giving nature.

I am a budding marine scientist, living the dream on an island and growing shellfish for ecological restoration. I would not even be close to thriving as I am without my mother. From a very young age, she has always made it clear to me and my brothers that we can do whatever we want and be whoever we want in this life, and she would do everything she could to help us get there. I’ve always been very grateful for having grown up with such a supportive set of parents.

Doug McConnell, HUSBAND

I knew Susan was special the first time we met, waiting for a train at the Barrington METRA station. We so enjoyed those train rides that we coordinated our schedules for the rides home, too. I was enchanted by her unique combination of empathy, creativity, and drive. We have four children together, three of whom came to us through adoption. Now as young adults, it is deeply satisfying to see that they all have embraced Susan’s important qualities.

It was the combination of those traits that led Susan to found Let It Be Us. Her photography opened her eyes to the dysfunction of the child welfare systems, and that the impact on those children of having impermanent homes put them at lifelong disadvantages. The stories are heartbreaking about what these children have endured.

Let It Be Us reflects Susan’s qualities. She has taken proven ideas from the business world and applied them to child welfare. They customize well-established tools of recruitment, education, coaching, database management, and customer service, all while remaining steadfast in their commitment to the mission of helping children. Susan’s ideas are quite literally changing the world.

Empathy. Creativity. Drive. Susan is utilizing them to complete her doctorate in Social Work. All of us—her family, Let It Be Us, and the children of the State of Illinois—are the beneficiaries of her gifts, and are living examples of the old expression of “being changed for good”. I am the luckiest of all, and I couldn’t be prouder of how the girl I met on the 7:11 a.m. train has become the mother of thousands.

Mack McConnell, SON

Susan is my biggest inspiration. Of course, I love her because she’s my mom, but as my role model, I admire her for working tirelessly to have a positive impact on the world and continuing to improve her mind. What she’s done with Let It Be Us gives me hope for the future. She’s laser-focused on helping kids get a more equitable start. These situations she navigates with kids are incredibly hard and ugly. For a lot of us, it’s just easier to ignore them, but Susan is just built differently. Seeing kids that are treated unfairly is her rocket fuel and she can’t do anything but help. She always reminds me that we can choose to focus on more important things and do it with more heart. Imagine a world where we had 100 Susans! The world would be better, and have a lot more Supertramp.



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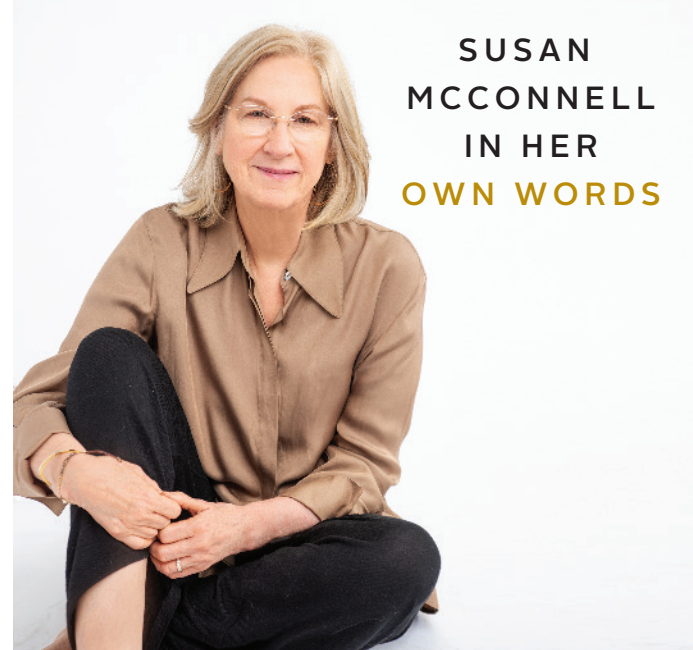
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SUSAN
MCCONNELL
IN HER
OWN WORDS

What's on your bucket list? Getting the free-range young adults in our family (my children) launched. Completing my doctorate degree in social work at the University of Southern California, a three-year program, at Christmas time 2023. Writing a book on the importance of advocacy for girls and women. **What is perfect happiness?** My family around our dinner table for one of their birthdays. **A historical figure you admire?** Katharine Graham and Steve Jobs for their tenacity. **Traits you admire in others?** Respect, inclusion, generosity, subtle humor, intense humor. **Dislike in others?** Disrespect, exclusion, closed mindedness, cruelty. **Your greatest achievement?** Creating a large and harmonious family through marriage, birth, and adoption. And maintaining a long and loving marriage with my best friend. **Values you hope to impart to your children?** Kindness, inclusion, generosity, hard work. **Favorite movie?** The "Star Wars" series. Life lessons that make us better human beings. **If you could have one superpower?** To spend time with those who we loved who have left this earth. **Personal motto?** Never give up and never be ordinary. **Favorite quote?** Some questions don't have answers, a terribly difficult lesson to learn (Katharine Graham). **How has starting a nonprofit changed you?** It's given me a new appreciation for teamwork. Our board of directors, our staff, and our volunteers have incredible passion for our mission. You get so much further with a team, and even further with the right team. **Favorite place to visit?** My heart lives on the island of Martha's Vineyard. I go there every chance I get. **Any regrets?** Not bringing more children into our family. **Advice to others who want to make a difference.** Be afraid to try something new but do it anyway. It boosts your creativity. Having alone time is good but avoid long-term isolation. Always forgive, do it quickly, and move on. Don't waste time keeping your people in a time out. Volunteer. Give your time and talent to others, to those who need you the most, in small ways and in big ways. Hang out with those whose eyes light up when you walk in the room. Be the caregiver for your aging parents. Always have a rescue dog, or two, by your side. 🐾