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Event planned for sparking innovation in South Bend

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Willow Wetherall, who came from Maine 11 years ago to earn a master's in international peace studies at the University of Notre Dame, decided to settle in South Bend about seven years ago when her first child was born.

"A little bit after the time she was born, we decided to put down roots," says Wetherall, who now has three children. "It was a quality-of-life decision. We had had our first child and knew we wanted more children. We had an opportunity to move anywhere we wanted to."

An investigation showed few options where she could choose to stay home with the children in a nice neighborhood, with the flexibility to work or live on one earner's income.

"There weren't very many other places in the country that we saw being able to do that," Wetherall says. "Suddenly, South Bend looked incredibly attractive to us in terms of raising a family."

Ever since then, Wetherall has been working to make the city an even more attractive place. She's organizing an Ignite event, part of an international movement for people to showcase their ideas and passions to stimulate cities' energy, for next March.

"They feature innovation in business, community projects, where people can talk about their personal passion," said Wetherall, who attended an Ignite Phoenix event in May. Participants have five minutes each to tell their stories and can use background slides, similar to a TED Talk.

"It moves very quickly," Wetherall says. "I was really impressed with the quality of the presentations and the diversity. You did not know what to expect next. You were exposed to really innovative projects that were happening right now in the city."

"It might be something you're familiar with but it was a completely different take, new ideas, new perspectives. They were funny. They were moving. We were all on the edge of our seats. At the intermission I turned to my mom who was with me and said, 'South Bend is ready for this.'"

Wetherall has spent years volunteering for neighborhood associations, leading a holistic moms' parenting group, serving on boards for Michiana Monologues and Planned Parenthood, and leading the Marquette Montessori PTO, among other things.

"Anytime anybody asked me to do something, I said yes," she explains. "I wanted to get to know as many people as possible and start making a difference in the community. I was growing the networks."

She started a preschool in her home and ran summer Adventure Camps for kids with activities such as making cheese and bread and harvesting community gardens and wild edible plants. Meanwhile, she's felt an accelerating energy in the city, including events such as Startup Weekends.

"In the last three years, I've really noticed progress," Wetherall says. "There's momentum starting to build. There's economic growth. People are thinking about sustainability. I am coming in contact more and more with incredible people. My circle keeps widening."

She's hoping to bring the energy of Ignite to South Bend, where local talks will become part of a global YouTube archive.

"I want other people to have that feeling when they walk away from the event," Wetherall says. "It's a sharing kind of thing to drive innovation and creativity and highlight and galvanize the good that's going on in the community."

"All of these types of events require collaboration. It's not like you're going to a regular conference. Everybody needs to be actively engaged in helping each other, figuring out how you can share information."

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