

# Van Laarhoven strives for positive change

2009 SouthCoast Woman of the Year



Southcoast Woman of the Year, Desa van Laarhoven

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January 03, 2010 12:00 AM

Desa Van Laarhoven keeps trying to leave Southeastern Massachusetts to explore the wider world, but work opportunities continue to draw the Lakeville native back home. So instead, she is bringing the world to SouthCoast, and in doing so, helping to make it a better place.

As executive director of the Marion Institute, 31-year-old Van Laarhoven manages the philanthropic group's \$1.2 million budget and a host of programs ranging from local to global in scope and seeking "to create deep and positive change for the earth and its inhabitants," according to the group's Web site.

About 50 percent of Van Laarhoven's time is spent organizing the annual Bioneers by the Bay: Connecting for Change conference, which aims to get youth and adults thinking about and taking action on environmental and social justice issues.

"We try to make our mantra, Connecting for Change, come to life by showing that food and farming is connected to green business, is connected to health and healing, is connected to empowerment and education," Van Laarhoven said. "You sort of can connect the dots by the end of our conference. We try to really promote solutions and systems thinking."

In October, the three-day conference, which has found a permanent home in New Bedford, drew more than 1,900 people hailing from New Jersey to Maine. That's big growth from the first conference in 2005, which attracted 250 people to then host UMass Dartmouth.

New Bedford Mayor Scott W. Lang and Marion Institute co-founder Michael Baldwin credit Van Laarhoven for having the confidence and foresight to move the growing conference to downtown New Bedford rather than Providence or Boston.

"She was the one who convinced the (Marion Institute) board that it made sense to be in New Bedford," Lang said. "She realized that by capturing the imagination of an urban area, you've just impacted 100,000 people. ... She really has done a terrific job at building bridges between different groups and getting them to be shepherds of a new sustainability consciousness."

"That is really the beauty of Desa," Baldwin said. "She has an unparalleled skill set and has the ability to pull together a great team and make things happen at the Marion Institute and to make contributions to the whole SouthCoast region."

For her contagious enthusiasm and ability to connect people and create positive change in the world, Desa Van Laarhoven has been named The Standard-Times 2009 SouthCoast Woman of the Year.

Nominations for the award came from the community and members of the newspaper staff. Recipients were selected by a newsroom committee.

"I feel really indebted and I am very humbled by all the women that work so hard, and I feel like I am accepting it on their behalf, the women that go unrecognized," Van Laarhoven said of the award. "I feel very privileged to be in this position. But I've got teammates back at the institute that work countless hours behind a desk, behind a computer, or on the phone making my job easier."

She attributes her passions for social justice and the environment to her family. The youngest of four siblings, including two who were adopted, she says she grew up "thinking outside the box." Her family lived on a small farm in Lakeville.

"All of a sudden you have a cow that you become attached to and you start to think about the environment," she said.

After graduating from Stonehill College in 2001, Van Laarhoven spent a year serving with AmeriCorps, traveling around the country to participate in community projects from building a house to working at a hospital. She also lived in California's Stanislaus National Forest for six months as a member of the California Conservation Corps.

After returning to SouthCoast, she volunteered for the Coalition for Buzzards Bay, collecting water samples from the bay. Soon, she was volunteering with the Marion Institute and helping to organize the first Bioneers by the Bay conference. The event ended with a job offer, but Van Laarhoven was torn because she had other dreams.

"Of course I had a life plan, my boyfriend and I were moving to Costa Rica for six months and then moving to Wyoming," she said. Instead, she lived on a sustainable ranch in Costa Rica for three months and then returned to SouthCoast to work for the Marion Institute.

About a year later, she was named interim director of the institute, and six months after that, executive director.

"My board is just super supportive and amazing," she said. "They have really been instrumental in my growth and my leadership. And my team on the ground as well."

Christina Bascom, who sits on the institute's associate board, describes Van Laarhoven as an inclusive leader, who develops ideas from the bottom up and "is a great believer in networks."

"Above all, she listens," Bascom said.

Her partners outside the institute agree.

"The thing that never ceases to amaze me about Desa is her level of energy and caring about the issues and about people," said Mark Rasmussen, executive director of the Coalition for Buzzards Bay. "For Desa, it is always about the people."

"She's just such a great thinker and she walks the walk in terms of what she's talking about with climate change and personal consumption," said Kate Fentress, executive director of The Women's Fund of the Community Foundation of Southeastern Massachusetts.

Planning is already under way for the 2010 Bioneers Conference, especially for meals that will be supplied by local farms. Van Laarhoven will delegate some of the planning so she can focus on other projects and finally take some time to travel the globe.

Work-related trips should bring her to Haiti, Cambodia and Costa Rica this year.

Closer to home, she is excited to educate community residents about Paracelsus Biological Medicine, an alternative approach to medicine that involves eliminating metals, dyes and other toxins from the body.

"There are major issues that we have to contend with in the soil and there are issues with water," Van Laarhoven said. "We need to rid our bodies of those toxins."

After serving in AmeriCorps, Van Laarhoven said she returned to SouthCoast with a new appreciation for the area.

"My favorite part about New Bedford specifically is the culture, is the diversity," she said. "I love that and love being around that."

The city is different than what she remembers from her Lakeville childhood.

"The doors have opened in New Bedford," she said. "I feel welcome. I feel part of the team."

First-time visitors to New Bedford are often surprised by the city's beauty, Van Laarhoven said.

"There is almost this tangible positive energy," she said. "Something is happening in New Bedford, and I think a lot of people feel it."

<http://www.southcoasttoday.com/apps/pbcs.dll/article?AID=/20100103/NEWS/1030358>

## **YOU TUBE: SouthCoast Woman of the Year: Desa Van Laarhoven**

URL: [http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=HLggiED2zBI&feature=player\\_embedded](http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=HLggiED2zBI&feature=player_embedded)

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