

Gwen Cooper balances passion for outdoors with new role as executive director of Women 4 Women

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by Lucy Pritchett

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Gwen Cooper has a very short to-do list.
Or a very long one, depending on how one looks at

Meet people.



Gwen Cooper, Executive Director of Women 4 Women, loves the outdoors and was photographed in Cherokee Park.

That's her list. Two words. As the new Executive Director of **Women 4 Women**, a not-for-profit organization that works to improve the economic self-sufficiency of women, Cooper is starting from scratch in a city that is one of neighborhoods, college buddies, and "where did you go to high school?"

She comes to Louisville from Baltimore via Florida. She moved here with her husband, Barton Cooper, and her 4-year-old son, Caden, from a house she and her husband built in the middle of the Apalachicola National Forest southwest of Tallahassee in the Florida panhandle. She brought her canoe and her kayak and her Merrell hiking boots. "Barton and I are avid hikers. We have hiked in 27 states, and Caden has hiked with us in 14." Even though she grew up in Baltimore, she feels more comfortable on wooded trails than on urban streets. She admits, though, that the balance of Louisville's cultural events and the closeness of parks and forests are what she finds so attractive about living here. Cooper and her husband and son are living temporarily in an apartment and are looking for land — 40 to 50 acres — to build and settle down on. It will be the third house they have built. "I couldn't live in the city," Cooper said. "I have to be somewhere I can see the stars, but with the city close."

A community conversation

Her role at Women 4 Women is focused on fund raising. To do that, Cooper, who took over the position in September, looks to both men and women to join in the community conversation. "I want to reach out to every woman in the community and let them join the movement," she said. "We are all just one catastrophe away from being the working poor ... the unemployed poor. I want women to have a voice." Women 4 Women, with offices at 323 W. Broadway, has an annual operating budget that ranges from \$500,000 to \$1 million, Cooper said.

Becky Phillips, chairwoman of the Women 4 Women board and of the committee that searched for a new executive director, said the organization was looking for someone who had a proven track record in fund raising and fund development. The committee also wanted someone with the ability to inspire and motivate and who would be an advocate for the organization. "We had over 60 applicants for the position. We narrowed it down to 10 and then two," Phillips said. "Gwen has a certification in fund raising and has an understanding of the fundamentals of not-for-profits and a knowledge of working with a board, staff and volunteers who share her passion."

Getting to know her new community

In the final stages of the two-day interview process, Cooper was asked: "What is the first thing you would do as executive director?" Her reply: "Meet people. And listen." Hence her tiny to-do list. To follow through on her list, Cooper has attended many, many networking events, she said. "And, our board and volunteers are phenomenal about introducing me to people in the community." She also has met other parents at her son's soccer games and at birthday parties.

Susan Barry, president and CEO of Community Foundation of Louisville, met with Cooper during that time. "My first impression was that she was unafraid, ambitious and enthusiastic," Barry said. "I met with her to make a personal connection and to talk about the Louisville lifestyle. I am a newcomer myself and am such a champion for the city. I told her, 'Come. You'll never regret it.'"

Cooper's previous position was president and CEO of Community Health Charities of Florida, a statewide organization that represents 60 of the state's health charities. She served in that position for eight years and increased pledged revenues to \$3.1 million from \$1.2 million. "I spent all my time on an airplane or driving," Cooper said about that job. "Being on the road is not glamorous. I didn't want to do that anymore." But traveling did offer time for thinking, she realizes. "My commute in Louisville is only 20 minutes. Now, I have to schedule time for thinking. I tell myself that it's OK to sit in my office and think."

Fostering a healthy lifestyle

Cooper is the parent of multi-generation children. In addition to Caden, she has two grown children, daughter Bari Kessler, 23, who lives in Tampa, and son Clay Kessler, 21, who attends the University of South Florida in

Tampa and graduated from U.S. Army basic training in November. So those birthday parties and soccer games she attends with Caden are “something I haven’t had to do in many years,” she said with a smile. “I think one of the biggest challenges facing women is managing time,” Cooper said. “One of my personal priorities is keeping healthy. My parents both died when they were young. I think if we stay healthy, we can do an incredible job.”

Cooper, who taught aerobics for 15 years, recently added the practice of yoga to her physical regimen, which includes working out four times a week. “I always thought yoga would be too slow for me, but I really like it.” But a healthy lifestyle for Cooper has to include a secret stash of Utz potato chips — her go-to snack. “I am a potato chip connoisseur,” she said with a smile. “You can only get them in four states.” And her ideal world for women? “One where there is the opportunity for women to be the primary caregiver for their children. A world where flexibility is the norm.”

Gwen Cooper - Executive Director, Women 4 Women

Birth date: Oct. 16, 1962

Hometown: Baltimore

Residence: East End

Husband: Barton Cooper, 51, Manager of Corporate and Government Relations
for EarthShare Florida and Community Health Charities of Florida

Children: Son Caden, 4; daughter Bari Kessler, 23, and son Clay Kessler, 21.

On the job since: September 2011

Previous experience: President and CEO, Community Health Charities of Florida, 2003-2011;
Vice President of Development, Community Health Charities of Florida, 2000-03;
Executive Director, Arthritis Foundation Gulf coast Region, Tampa; 1999-2000

Education: Bachelor’s degree in mass communications with a minor in speech communications,
University of South Florida, Tampa, 1980;
Certified Fund Raising Executive (CFRE) certification, September 2010

Drives: 2011 bronze Kia Sportage

A big fan of: Maryland crab

Learned from her parents: “Expect to succeed, and surround yourself with inspiring people.”

Last movie: “Cars 2”

Mantra: “Leave it better than you found it. That includes your job, your children, your community.”

Pet peeve: “People who don’t do what they say they are going to do.”

Snakes, alligators and banana spiders

It was a match made in, well, the woods.

He was timber manager for a tree plantation in Florida. She had a daughter at the same private school as the owner’s son. There was a field trip for the class to the tree farm. Gwen Kessler went along. Barton Cooper was there. That was late 1999, and they married in October 2001.

Their idea of relaxing, said Barton Cooper, is to do something physically exerting. He can’t decide whether he and Gwen are two individuals with one idea or whether they each just have the same idea.

“We are not ones to lie on the beach with a margarita,” he said. “We find hiking through mountains and forests and enjoying the beautiful scenery to be exhilarating.”

Canoeing is another way the couple finds to get away from stress and strain.

“Once we were canoeing on a remote river in Florida,” Barton Cooper said. “I mean wild, with snakes and alligators. Caden (their 4-year-old son) and I were ahead of Gwen and winding around the S curves of the river.”

Oops. Suddenly, no Gwen. The two paddled back and found her on the bank, soaking wet. A banana spider, which weaves huge webs over the water to catch insects, had snagged Gwen Cooper instead. She got tangled up in tree limbs, her canoe overturned, and she was bailing out when her husband and son arrived.

“She never yelled or anything,” Barton Cooper said. “She is really quite capable. We all just carried on with our trip.”