

Historical Society leader in the right Place

■ Michelle Place says the job in Tulsa has become a perfect fit for her.

BY SCOTT CHERRY
World Scene Writer

It was a cold, dank January day in 2001 when Michelle Place stepped into the Sam Travis Mansion to interview for a job with the Tulsa Historical Society and Museum.

"The executive director, Clayton Vaughn, had a small office there," Place said. "The mansion had no central heat or air, the basement was flooded, the roof leaked, there were asbestos problems and black mold was everywhere.

"And I walked out with the job."

The job was to help Vaughn and the late Rex Ball, an architect and chairman of the Tulsa Preservation Commission, prepare for the Deco World Congress coming up that April. The congress was made up of art deco enthusiasts who visit a different city every two years.

"Neither Rex nor Clayton had administrative skills, and we had 150 Decophiles coming to town," Place said. "I knew Rex, and he was the one who recommended I talk to Clayton."

Place said the Deco World



Michelle Place has worked at the Tulsa Historical Society and Museum since 2001 and has been executive director the past two years. Photos by MATT BARNARD/Tulsa World

their wedding and anniversary announcements, and for 10 years she was wedding coordinator for Boston Avenue United Methodist Church.

In the late 1990s, she also worked for the Tulsa County Bar Association, where she tried to match attorneys with firms that had job openings.

"It was not a good fit," she said. "I couldn't make anyone happy."

That led to her interview with the Tulsa Historical Society and Museum.

She said the No. 1 request she receives is from people wanting information on the 1921 Race Riot.

"We probably get at least five requests a week, from Tokyo, Seattle, Minnesota, you name it," she said. "We have most of it digitized now, so a grad student in Boston, for instance, doesn't have to travel all the way here to view the materials.

"I think we get better every year. I think we've built a good foundation over the years, and I think the society and museum is right where it needs to be.

"And you know, this job has become such a perfect fit for me."

We recently asked Place about a few of her favorite things.

What are you reading?

"The Jamestown Experiment" by Tony Williams and "The Life and Times

Congress was a success, and she stayed on as business manager at the Historical Society, which had purchased the Travis Mansion in late 1997.

A wing to the mansion to hold the society's collections was built in 2004, but it wasn't until 2007 that the funds needed to refurbish the original mansion were collected.

"Clayton stayed for six years and encouraged me to take his job," Place said. "I didn't think I was ready, and we hired Sharon Terry, who was a great choice. She brought a lot of experience with nonprofits and fundraising that we needed."

She said Terry left after six years, and Place still didn't think she was right for the job.

"I don't enjoy asking for money," she said. "I was more interested in education and programs, so we had another job search. As it turned out, I didn't think the person we were looking at most seriously was a good fit. I figured it would be harder to train someone than do it myself, so I threw my hat in the ring."

Place was hired, and she just completed her second year as executive director.

"We have a \$750,000 budget, which is skin and bones when you consider we have to keep the museum at a constant temperature and humidity, and we have to maintain the mansion and acres of gardens and grounds," Place said. "We receive no public funding, so raising money is still a big issue."

Place said she is excited about the new 1950s Tulsa exhibit, which includes such items as a gorgeous

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Michelle Place discusses the new 1950s Tulsa exhibit at the Tulsa Historical Society and Museum.

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1958 turquoise Edsel, an iron lung from St. John Hospital, a speaker box menu from Pennington's Drive-In and the lunch counter from Steve's Books & Sundry.

"We already have had quite a response to the exhibit, and right now I'm working to get more schools involved to have the students visit," she said.

Much of the exhibit is new to Place because she did not grow up in Tulsa. She is a native of Little Rock, Arkansas.

"I had a magical childhood, and I loved going to the University of Arkansas, where I was a journalism major," Place said.

She said following graduation, one of her best friends, a Miss Arkansas alumna, asked her to accept a blind date for an upcoming Texas-Arkansas football game in Little Rock.

"It was kind of funny," Place said. "She and her date squabbled the



A new exhibit at the Tulsa Historical Society and Museum features many pieces of Tulsa's 1950s history, including a turquoise Edsel, the lunch counter from Steve's Books & Sundry and more.

whole time, while Kirk and I fell instantly in love. On our second date we decided to get married. I saw him exactly seven times before we married, and we've been married for 34 years."

Her husband, an engineer, worked for an oil company in Duncan, Oklahoma, at the time.

"Here I was a city girl, and our address in Duncan was Southwest of City," Place said. "One night Kirk said he would take me to a movie, '101 Dalmations,' and then go check on a well."

"He said I might want to bring a pillow to the oil field, and I found out why. We were out there 36 hours. Then we moved to Healdton, and by the time we got transferred to Oklahoma City — a Garden of Eden at the time — I had

learned a lot about the oil business."

She said her husband took a job in Corpus Christi, Texas, "which I loved," before getting laid off during the oil bust. She said Kirk, who had grown up in Fayetteville, Arkansas, always had been fond of Tulsa, so they moved here looking for new careers.

"We figured I could find a job pretty quickly, which I did," Place said. "I knew I could do oil and gas accounting. I understood drilling reports, which was a big advantage for me."

That job would not last, though. She got laid off when the Places' only child, Laura, was in first grade.

After that, she worked part time at Paper Chase, where she said she helped many Tulsans with

of the Thunderbolt Kid" by Bill Bryson. On audio, I'm listening to "Winter of the World" by Ken Follett.

What are you watching?

"Outlander" on Starz.

What is your favorite thing about Tulsa?

We have a long history of being one of America's most generous cities.

What is a perfect night out for you in Tulsa?

Being anywhere I can see the sun set — a restaurant, rooftop, a ballpark or my own backyard.

What is your all-time favorite TV show or movie?

"Designing Women"

Is there an exhibit you really want to do but haven't been able to pull together yet?

The Tapestry of Tulsa where we showcase how and when so many different ethnic groups and cultures came to this place and began weaving their lives into our community we call Tulsa.

What are your hobbies or interests outside the Historical Society?

Laughing with my husband, golf, learning new things, entertaining friends and family, and being an active member of the Boston Avenue United Methodist Church.

Is there an item in your refrigerator or pantry you can't do without?

What my husband and I call "Work-day Baileys." That means coffee creamer. On Saturdays or holidays, you can have the real Baileys in your coffee.

What is your favorite flower?

Lilies of any kind. The bigger aroma, the better.

What is your favorite drink and food pairing?

Chardonnay and Cheetos Puffs.

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