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The Children Magazine's Perpetual Student

Eileen O'Tousa-Crowson places the blue porcelain mug on the edge of her desk, its dark, liquid contents never out of reach, as she leans back into the couch. The lurid colors of the *National Geographic Kids* magazine layouts hanging from the wall offer a stark contrast to the soft light emanating from the lamp on her desk. At ease in her neatly arranged office at the National Geographic Society, she begins to toy with a strand of her blonde hair. Her crossed legs, adorned with black, animal-print tights, and relaxed posture give away no hint of the demanding schedule awaiting her return. Instead, O'Tousa-Crowson's vibrant expressions and compelling voice expose an artist whose convictions are shamelessly grounded in a bumper sticker.

"I truly believe that we are, and this is a quote, we are not humans having a spiritual experience, we're spiritual beings having a human experience," says the 54-year-old art director of the *National Geographic Kids* and *Little Kids* magazines. "So that plays into my firm belief that that we're just floating on an infinite time line of experiences, and learning and growing. And everything matters and kind of nothing matters, but not in that cliché way that nothing matters. Meaning it's OK to make some mistakes, but pick up and keep doing the next right thing. Keep doing the next learning and growing thing."

It's an ideology that fits seamlessly into her job at a children's magazine, where she is expected to think in bold colors, captivating fonts and exciting layouts on a daily basis. With her "whacky" style, it has become the dream job. Her eyes spend most of the workday affixed to a computer screen, but the same cannot be said of the imagination responsible

for conjuring up the magazine's design. O'Tousa-Crowson gets to work in a job where thinking like a kid is encouraged, but where her years of design experience make *National Geographic Kids* magazine a success.

"This is my dream job," she says as her eyebrows rise and eyes widen in excitement. "Like where has it been my whole life? I love it. Because I've always been kind of whacky and fun and love fun and the colors and I love kids. And I just came in here and I'm like, I love it."

As a single mom to a 14-year-old son, she often juggles her time between work and home. O'Tousa-Crowson divorced her ex-husband when their son was two-years-old; but still friends, she works closely with him in raising their child. Committed to passing on the love of learning to her son, her role as a parent often exudes over into her job as a designer with a younger audience.

"Because it's like education, education, education. It has to be the love of learning," says O'Tousa-Crowson, the side of her one hand repeatedly striking the palm of the other.

Unable to recall the first year of her life, O'Tousa-Crowson doesn't hesitate to call herself a native of the area. She was born in Louisiana and only a year old when her father's job as a forensic scientist for the Federal Bureau of Investigation relocated the family to Silver Spring, Maryland. There, O'Tousa-Crowson grew up with one sibling, an older brother, in what she recalls as a disparate family.

"Unfortunately, you know, my parents started arguing when I was in third or fourth grade," she says. "So it was never any fun past second grade. But I still love them, you know, it's just so sad."

O'Tousa-Crowson's relationship with her older brother, born from their shared love of art, provided a diversion from a dysfunctional home life. Together, they spent summers swimming and exploring art through the world. Her realistic drawings eventually garnered the praise of teachers in school, and O'Tousa-Crowson began to realize her talent as an artist. It was a label that would begin to formulate who she was and how she thought.

"So then I started recognizing, oh! You know, certain people have artistic talent and other people don't have artistic talent," she says. "Now, whether or not that's what made me go into art, I can't really say. You know, did it? I just found that I loved it. I saw the colors and I saw the shapes and I liked to draw."

Like many an aspiring artist, O'Tousa-Crowson dreamed of attending a renowned art institution. At her father's persistence, however, she completed her studies in communication design at the University of Maryland. She didn't end up at an art-based school, but O'Tousa-Crowson still found ways—albeit somewhat unconventional—to grow as an artist outside of the classroom.

"Saturday nights for me were spent, not always going out partying with friends or whatever. A lot of times it was just me and my friend, or just a bunch of us would; there were classrooms at Maryland. Painting studios that, we would go in there. We would go in there and we would smoke our cigarettes, and drink our wine, and paint," she says, her voice lowered as a sheepish grin makes its way across her face. "And that's what we'd do until they basically told us to leave. But that was fun for us. Our art was what we were living and breathing."

After graduating, O'Tousa-Crowson found herself as the manager of the display department at JC Penny. Although it wasn't her dream job, she went in not knowing what to

do, learned how to do it, and did it. She worked at “Penny’s” for a little while before following a lead for a community newspaper, the *Potomac Almanac*.

“It was in Potomac, in like the old Potomac, the Potomac Village, in an old house,” she says, a strand of hair twisting around her finger. “With crickety, cratchety, wooden floors that you’d walk up and I went in there. The people were all so nice and kind of laid back. There wasn’t even air conditioning in this building, just the wind blowing through these windows.”

She quickly fell in love with the job; so much so, she ended up working at the newspaper for five-and-a-half years. During which time, she introduced the Macintosh computer to the production process. In doing so, the newspaper became the first establishment on the East Coast to use the Macintosh to produce their publication.

“And so everything was happening so fast, as you know technology just boom, boom, boom,” she says as her hands move through the air in excitement. “I bring it to my editor she’s like OK let’s look into this. And all of a sudden within in six months we have a laser printer, we have a Page Maker software program, we have trainings going on, and we’re starting to print everything out.”

But then she started getting “itchy.” It was always the need to do more, to get more experience, and to learn from people who have already done it that kept O’Tousa-Crowson moving forward in her career. Moving to what was eventually the creative director of the *Washingtonian* magazine, where she worked closely with renowned city magazine mastermind, Jack Limpert.

“He had a very cut and dry sense of what good design was, if things were excessive, he cut it out,” she says. “Whether it was words, he cut it out of the design. You know, when I

got to understand Jack. And I really loved the working relationship I had with him because I got to develop and refine myself as a designer through an editorial perspective.”

After 16-and-a-half years with the *Washingtonian*, O'Tousa-Crowson was laid off after Cathy Merrill Williams came in as the new publisher of the magazine. In the next two years, she would try her hand at freelancing while caring for her ailing father, who had been diagnosed with cancer.

“And my dad was gradually declining. Then in August, he passed away. And, oh my gosh. Not only did he pass away, but there I was floating in this abyss now again, another abyss in a way. Because I'm like wow, my dad's gone. I'm not driving there every day to see him, and wow, I don't have a job. And I don't think I really want to be a freelancer again. I want to do something else and I was so emotionally wrecked over my father passing away.”

But true to her philosophy, O'Tousa-Crowson kept doing the next learning and growing thing. After two years of unemployment, she received a call from Jay Sumner, a photo editor she worked with at the *Washingtonian* who was working at *National Geographic Kids* magazine. There was an art director opening, which would eventually lead to an office door plaque with O'Tousa-Crowson's name inscribed on it.

“She's just a blast to work with besides being really creative and good,” says Sumner. “And we were a good partnership because, you know, I was the photo editor and she was, you know, the designer. She'd be working on the cover story or whatever and I could sit down with her and say gosh, I thought that'd be a good lead or maybe, you know, we could put this there. So it was a real collaboration as you could see she is easy to work with, you know.”

Lifelong friend, Marilyn Ritzau, recalls her first impression of O'Tousa-Crowson in elementary school was of a great artist with a sense of humor. They were qualities that initiated a friendship, but it is O'Tousa-Crowson's loyalty that helped to maintain it.

"I think our relationship is based on mutual respect, caring, and knowing that we "have each other's back" while infusing our relationship with fun and creativity," says Ritzau. "Even now, we try to meet each Sunday morning to have coffee, talk about our life-things and do art!! We both share a lot of the same values."

O'Tousa-Crowson leans forward and reaches for the coffee mug on her desk. She leaves it resting in between her hands, her eyes looking off, distracted by the train of thought escaping from her mouth.

"We'd have peace in our world if everyone constantly just kept turning to do the next right thing and everyone constantly forgave themselves every time they might have slipped up. They might do something wrong, or if everyone thought about not hurting other people, but how can we make it better, how can we make it better, how can we make it better? Just, that's all I ever do in my head. So everyday is a, how can I make it better in my work? How I communicate with people? That's all I am. And then when we transform into the next reality, whatever we become, I seriously believe in all of my research that it is just an ongoing continuum. And we just change shapes," she says, her eyes coming back into focus. "Hopefully I don't sound crazy, but to me it makes perfect sense."