December 23, 2016

Dear Review Committee,

I am pleased to nominate Leslie Berckes for the 2017 class of *Forty Under 40*. Let me first expose the obvious bias – Leslie is my wife. I understandably have a high opinion of her as a person and stand proud of her achievements. Plus, she would be shocked that I submitted her name for nomination as she is not an attention seeking individual. However, Leslie’s many achievements and involvement in community enriching activities deserve recognition from an august committee and I am pleased to share her merits.

First and foremost, Leslie cares deeply about this community. Through her role as Trees Forever’s Des Moines Field Coordinator, Leslie developed a partnership with the Des Moines Public Works department to create a volunteer program called “Tree Keepers.” The Tree Keepers program aims to train a volunteer workforce of passionate private citizens in proper tree planting and tree care. One of the most important aspects of a healthy, vibrant community is a healthy urban forest and by leading the training of over 150 Des Moines area citizens, Leslie has a dedicated crew of tree advocates at her fingertips. This incredible program has grown from a seed first planted by her to the organization’s leadership in 2012 and has grown in popularity to the point that Trees Forever has expanded the program to municipalities throughout the state under her management. I want to emphasize that this is a program she ran in addition to her many, varied tasks already required of her normal job duties at Trees Forever. She has presented at multiple national conferences discussing this and other programs, spotlighting Des Moines as an environmentally friendly community to eyes and ears around the country.

Leslie manages to run multiple programs for Trees Forever, including the Iowa Living Roadways partnership with the Iowa DOT, while helping small towns in the greater Des Moines area and beyond with community visioning and tree plantings. Leslie’s main focus remains advocating for trees in the Des Moines area and has successfully procured grants from Principal Insurance, Wells Fargo Insurance, Prairie Meadows, Whole Foods and recently coordinated a spotlight event for Hy-Vee with Harrison Barnes. From helping plant fruit trees with local community gardens to engaging inmates at Mitchellville Correctional Facility, Leslie believes in the power of harmony in all corners of the community. She is a recognized leader by state and local politicians for her ability to engage community involvement and regularly takes meetings to share the “pulse” of the community with these leaders.

Leslie served a term as the President of the Waveland Park Neighborhood Association. During her tenure, she procured a stormwater infrastructure improvement grant from the State of Iowa that directly benefits the local community. It was a rare win for the City of Des Moines for that kind of grant as traditionally funds have been awarded to small and medium sized communities. Leslie was able to demonstrate how worthy the project was and breakthrough the traditional Des Moines barricade with effective partnerships and communication. Additionally, Leslie navigated through a difficult situation when a murder was committed in the neighborhood by proactively reaching out to the detective and communicating with city council members and then relaying information back to the membership.

Leslie currently serves on the board of Animal Lifeline, a Des Moines area special needs animal shelter. Her passion for animal welfare speaks volumes about who she is as a person. Protecting those among us who can’t protect themselves reveals a lot about the moral fiber of her being. As she works through her new responsibilities and implements a fresh set of ideas for the organization, I expect Animal Lifeline will flourish. She has already helped the organization adopt out several “long-term residents” through some of her marketing techniques and has set the path forward for an organization currently mired in financial duress through strategic planning efforts. She has volunteered with other Des Moines area animal locations including working with the Animal Rescue League on farm animal education and outreach.

Leslie was nominated to join the Des Moines New Leaders Council by Ralph Rosenberg, Executive Director of the Iowa Environmental Council. She followed up that experience by attending the Women’s Leadership Development Program led by Ginny Wilson Peters, a University of Iowa MBA Faculty member. These experiences have helped her refine her leadership style and better understand how she can be an effective leader in the community. From the Student Employee of the Year as an undergrad, to a standout Governor’s intern, to now a civic leader in environmental and animal issues, Leslie has steadily increased her ability to have a positive impact on the community

Thank you for allowing me to share my nomination of Leslie for the Forty Under 40 program. As you piece together a class of deserving leaders in the community, I urge you to consider the steady diligence, creativity, and passion of Leslie, who works every day to make Des Moines a better place for all of us.

Sincerely,

~Jeff Berckes