

# LAWRENCE BUSINESS MAGAZINE

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# Women of Impact



# Kate Dinneen

by Darin White,  
photo by Steven Hertzog



A jack-of-all-trades, Kate Dinneen has her hands in not only her passion for blacksmithing and bike riding, but also acting as a role model to teens through Van Go and volunteering her time with Emergency Management for Douglas County.



**Kate Dinneen thinks of various ways of having influence, including wealth or title, or, as she prefers to say, as a connector. Connectors are by definition a person or thing that links two or more things together. In Author Malcolm Gladwell's book "The Tipping Point: How Little Things Can Make a Difference," he describes connectors: "The point about Connectors is that by having a foot in so many different worlds, they have the effect of bringing them all together." This idea of influence, Dinneen believes, is also directly tied to respect and integrity.**

In 1963, Dinneen's family arrived in Lawrence so her father could teach French and linguistics at the University of Kansas. Her mother began teaching a few years later. She was born overseas in Saigon, Vietnam, where her father was stationed as a translator. When she was growing up, she wanted to be an Olympic ice skater for the Vietnam ice-skating team and planned to join after she received dual citizenship when she turned 18. However, Saigon fell before this time, and she never received dual citizenship.

Dinneen has lived in Spain and France, where, because of necessity, she became fluent in Spanish and French. Soon after her return to Lawrence, she discovered an interest in and talent for playing the upright string bass. She played from this point through junior high, high school and college. She performed with the Topeka Symphony for many years as well as in the "Nutcracker" at the Lawrence Arts Center.

At one point, Dinneen discovered her love of biking and was on a path to compete in the 1992 Barcelona Olympic Games as a cyclist. She was a five-time state champion for road and time trial in Kansas cycling. Additionally, she trained with the Masters national cycling team and rode at the Ore-Ida

Women's Challenge, a grueling, multiday, multistage challenge race called "The Toughest Women's Race in History," by Isabel Best, of Rouleur magazine. Unfortunately, during training for the Olympics, she was hit by a vehicle, sustained injuries and was unable to continue to compete, crushing her second Olympic dreams.

## Local Bike Trails

As a cyclist, Dinneen volunteered for Friends of the Lawrence Area Trails (FLAT), which has been working to help create the Lawrence Loop as well as maintain and promote Lawrence area bike trails. She was one of the originators and chair of the board of the organization from 2017 to 2021. FLAT (named so because Lawrence is not flat, as so many people assume of Kansas) says its group "is devoted to developing, promoting and maintaining a robust, accessible trails system serving the diverse people and communities of Douglas County and Northeast Kansas." The Lawrence Loop, as it is called, is a series of connected paved trails that circles around the city. There are only a few areas left to be finished so the entire loop is connected. When finished, it will be 22 miles long.

In addition to her passions and interests, Dinneen is a full-time blacksmith. She has been part of associations such as Artist Blacksmith's Association of North America (ABANA) as well as other international associations, and has traveled and worked on blacksmithing projects all over the world. She worked on the Globe Theater Gates, in London, England, and received, along with others, a prestigious Tonypandy Cup award from the Worshipful Company of Blacksmiths.

## Van Go

Because of her love of blacksmithing, connecting and also encouraging others, Dinneen has been volunteering at the creative nonprofit Van Go, which supports and encourages teens in their own creativity. "Using art as the vehicle for self-expression, self-confidence and hope for the future, Van Go empowers young people to create their own vision of success," according to the Van Go website.

For the last decade, Dinneen has volunteered her time teaching blacksmithing to teens. She knows most of these lessons go deeper than just hammering red hot metal and will help shape teens into healthier, more well-rounded humans. Even if these teens don't end up using the metal-shaping skills in a trade, they will have a better understanding of and respect for the creative process.

Kristen Malloy, co-executive director of Van Go, confirms, "Kate has been an invaluable part of our Van Go family for almost 10 years, dedicating her time and sharing her many talents with not only the youth in our programs but our agency as a whole. Kate is a very accomplished blacksmith, but she is also an incredible teacher and mentor. Her compassionate character and ability to teach our youth her craft with such care, enthusiasm and intentionality is unparalleled. We are so grateful to Kate for the countless ways she supports Van Go and our entire community."

Dinneen also hopes to influence future generations by providing practical tools—not just a hammer but ways of dealing with relationships, community and life. One area she believes most of us could improve is our ego. "If you are a good influencer, you will have to deal with ego," she explains.

## Emergency Management

In summers, storm-chasing was something some Kansas kids did for fun. At least, it's what Dinneen did. Eventually, this led her to a volunteer group called SKYWARN, which has locations all over the United States.

According to the National Weather Service, "To obtain critical weather information, the National Weather Service (NWS) established SKYWARN with partner organizations" as its eyes on the ground. Generally connected to the Office of Emergency Management, these volunteer groups are assigned locations or "chase" storms and radio back reports. Technology has changed, but these groups are still a necessary part of early warnings.

After a number of years with SKYWARN, Dinneen was hired by Emergency Management as part of the Federal Emergency Management Agency's CERT (Community Emergency Response Team) program. "The CERT program educates volunteers about disaster preparedness for the hazards that may occur where they live," according to FEMA.org. Dinneen has worked her way up during the last 15 years to duty officer and, in addition, the Douglas County CERT manager.

As a duty officer, Dinneen is on call overnights and weekends, so if anything happens requiring additional support and the opening of the operation center, she is contacted first. She could receive a call from dispatch or the incident commander, and if needed, she will contact the director and deputy director. It is important to note that Emergency Management are first responders for weather, but during any other emergency, it acts as a supporting agency. Emergency Management is the connection to the Weather Service and is responsible for watching the weather and sounding the sirens.

Emergency Management acts as support for fun events such as the KU men's basketball team winning the NCAA National Championship in 2022 and the corresponding crowds that followed downtown, to other emergency events such as

supporting the health department during COVID-19. Dinneen acted as a volunteer and traffic coordinator for 26 mass vaccination events from Jan. 29, 2021, to April 28, 2021, at the Douglas County Fairgrounds.

CERT provides training classes twice a year, once in spring and again in fall. Dinneen says about CERT training programs: "My hope is it helps them influence their friends and family with disaster prep."

She is currently writing an article for FEMA about the need to provide mental health support systems for volunteers, especially through peer support, as they understand what others in Emergency Management are dealing with. The piece will be the featured article in the FEMA quarterly newsletter. Dinneen continues to be influential in the community in many ways—whatever she sets her mind to. ▲

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