



# Meet Heather Aldrich

The mind behind Wisconsin's provocative ad campaigns.  
{ leia**ferrari** | photos by adam ryan**morris** }

It's a late night in Milwaukee.

While taking a cab ride home, the police chief suddenly asks the driver to stop. He sees a homeless teen sleeping next to the Hi Hat Lounge, a popular restaurant on the East Side. As he gets out of the car and approaches the teen, dread washes over him. How will he explain this to the driver, to his co-workers?

He fell for one of Milwaukee's biggest stories in 2008 — a bold campaign to raise awareness for Pathfinders, a shelter and counseling center for at-risk youth. The

campaign, brazenly titled “How Can You Sleep?,” involved carefully placing life-like stickers of sleeping homeless teens at bus stops, on billboards and at storefronts across the city.

The campaign was a success, contributing to a 21 percent increase in annual funding for Pathfinders.

The company behind the campaign is Serve Marketing, and the woman behind Serve is Heather Aldrich. With a soft voice and loud hair, she is known for changing the way non-profit organizations attract

attention. And within Milwaukee, she's also known for her “I don't take no for an answer” attitude.

According to Aldrich, Serve is the only non-profit advocacy advertising firm in the country. While they don't charge for their services, it's surprising how often Aldrich's services are turned down — at least at first.

“Almost every campaign that Serve has done, people initially said no,” says Aldrich.

But Serve wouldn't exist if Aldrich left it at that.

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lesson learned, it's that rejection is an opportunity.

"It's an opportunity," she says, to approach the situation "in a way that turns the rejection into approval."

Campaigns like "How Can You Sleep?" require a bit of patience, which Aldrich believes is key to her success at Serve. It takes time for a campaign to take hold, and it also takes time to "educate anyone who has a say in the campaign," as Aldrich does.

"We're not shocking just to be shocking... We want the shock to turn into action," she says.

And "How Can You Sleep?" did indeed lead to action across Milwaukee. In 2008, Pathfinders saw a 47 percent increase in its donor base. In addition, the Milwaukee police department threatened to fine local restaurant Trocadero after police were continually dispatched to confirm there weren't actually homeless teens sleeping outside.

Gary Mueller is the executive creative director at BVK, a Milwaukee ad firm, and Serve is around today thanks to him. He traded a partnership and pay raise to make his dream of a non-profit ad agency a reality, but he says Aldrich has made all the difference in getting Serve campaigns to see the light of day.

"She takes people that say no to us, explains the importance of what we do, and she changes people's opinions," Mueller says of his prize hire. "That's very difficult to do, I've only seen a handful of people do that."

Because Serve doesn't charge for its creative services — the only bill the client pays is to cover production costs — it's often considered by nonprofits with minimal budgets as a means of reaching the masses.

The United Way of Greater Milwaukee has no shortage of community support, but the wide variety of causes it endorses means funds are quickly spread thin. In 2006, the organization released a landmark report, "If Truth Be Told," regarding the rising teen pregnancy rate in Milwaukee. As a result of the report, a Teen Pregnancy Oversight Committee formed to begin making concentrated efforts toward lowering the Milwaukee teen pregnancy rate — and they reached out to Serve for help.

A major component of the efforts that followed were Serve campaigns to combat

Serve Marketing has received hundreds of thank-you notes for their campaigns



and raise awareness of teen pregnancy. The innovative ads gained national attention, and more importantly, got teens across the city talking about the issue.

Aldrich herself went out to gather opinions from Milwaukee teens about a particular bus shelter ad. The results would be both surprising and gratifying.

"As we were filming them, that ad triggered memories of our other ads. That's exactly what we set out to accomplish. It was awesome to see it happen in their heads and then start a conversation about it right there."

Getting through to teens is tough enough for parents, but for advertisers, getting through to the skeptical Gen Y set is nearly impossible. Luckily, Aldrich is not concerned about obstacles that stand in her way. It comes back to her philosophy — it's not about the obstacles themselves, but how


you get around them.

"Heather has changed everything about how we operate," Mueller says. "Every time we have a problem where someone tries to stop us, she overcomes all of the obstacles, lobbies the right people, and the campaigns succeed."

Aldrich says it's true. "I feel like I'm part lobbyist," she says, explaining that all outdoor advertising — a main component of many Serve campaigns — in the city of Milwaukee needs approval from the Milwaukee County Board of Supervisors' transit committee. And when looking at some of Serve's ads, it's clear that her path to success is riddled with adversity.

For Aldrich, the first step to winning people over is to meet with the right people. Before Serve's teen pregnancy campaigns began, Aldrich landed meetings with committee members by saying she was a





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they take for granted — and all because they were confronted by something that could not be overlooked.

This is certainly a powerful technique. However, it’s the personal stories real people share that really pack a punch. When Aldrich is able to convince someone to share his or her story, sometimes a small, but meaningful gesture will follow — and that’s when Aldrich knows she helped make a difference.

In 2009, a mother who had spoken publicly about the tragic story of her shaken baby contacted Aldrich. The woman’s neighbor recognized her and stopped her to say she thought of the campaign every time she was at a breaking point with her infant.

“I forwarded that to everyone who volunteered on that campaign,” Aldrich says.

And while small gestures do bring her great joy, and while her campaigns regularly meet and exceed the expectations of Serve’s clients, Aldrich does not consider herself impervious to criticism. Considering the gravity of some of the causes she works with, Aldrich faces a daily battle maintaining an attitude of professionalism, energy and creativity that seems to be just the right combination for clients. Despite her success, she still battles the same insecurities many women struggle with deep down.

“I am no stranger to self doubt,” she confesses. “That’s where working for a cause every day helps...It’s bigger than me and my self-doubt.” She also has some advice to share with women who don’t have the same good fortune of finding their dream jobs.

“Hold on to each accomplishment. Even if it’s just a successful birthday party for your kid,” she says. “We allow ourselves to feel bad about our mistakes [but we need] to hold on to ... the smaller successes and let them fuel future success.” ■

citizen concerned about the rising teen pregnancy rates in the city.

And several years later, despite some controversy and initially reluctant board members, the campaigns can be considered a success: Recent data from public health officials shows that Milwaukee’s teen pregnancy rates are dropping, even in the face of a bleak economy.

Some critics say Serve’s ads are too much, but Aldrich disagrees.

“It’s worth the risk of offending,” she says. “We’re not talking about making less money. We’re talking about saving lives. Isn’t that worth it?”

Dan Magnuson, president and CEO of Pathfinders, agrees. “In order to get people’s attention, you need to make them uncomfortable,” he says.

In commercial advertising, the last thing you hope to do is make people

uncomfortable enough to avoid your campaign. But Serve is confident that their tactics, when applied to non profit campaigns, will move viewers enough to take a second look and reconsider. In the world of non-profit advertising, in which soft music and sepia-toned video footage previously dominated, Serve’s in-your-face tactics changed the game.

Take the “How Can You Sleep?” campaign mentioned earlier. Pathfinders had been struggling to make Milwaukee residents care not only about homelessness, but homeless teens specifically.

Thanks to the campaign that turned heads — including that of the police chief — Milwaukeeans were forced to wonder how they could ignore a freezing teen sleeping at their feet. It was a provocative campaign not because of the images, but because it made people recognize the comfortable lifestyles



# The Curb Quiz

**Name:** Heather Aldrich

**Nickname:** I always wish I had one. I'm open to ideas!

**One cause I'd love the chance to work with:** Adult literacy

**When I'm stressed I listen to:** 70's funk (Rick James, Funkadelic, Parliament)

**The thing I miss most about Milwaukee when I'm away from home:** Family

**If I weren't executive director of Serve, I would:**

- a. be a roller derby girl
- b. move to New York and start my own business
- c. spend more time on my trampoline
- d. work for a neighborhood organization for at risk youth

**One thing I could not live without is my:**

- a. iPhone
- b. Betsey Johnson purses
- c. Veuve Clicquot Champagne
- d. all the above!!

**I'd love to play** the Marchesa Luisa Casati **in a movie.**

**The accomplishment I'm most proud of is:**

My two kids Meghan and Drew

**The best advice I ever got:** "if you tell the truth you don't have to remember anything." Mark Twain

**My favorite place in Wisconsin is:** My family's estate nestled in the blue hills of northern Wisconsin

**In five years I want to be:** well traveled