

Getting to Know ... Bridget Laird

BY RYAN NELSON
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Provided

Chief Executive Officer of WINGS for Kids Bridget Laird with her daughter Reese, 7, husband Mike, and son Heath, now 6 months.

It all started with a simple ad for job in the newspaper. Pittsburgh native Bridget Laird moved to Charleston 13 years ago with her high school sweetheart, Mike, to start a new life after college in the Holy City. Little did she know that answering that classified ad would change her life and so many lives of Lowcountry children.

Recently, Laird was named the chief executive officer of WINGS for Kids, a local nonprofit that develops social and emotional intelligence through after school programs. It's the only organization of its kind in the nation to solely focus on social and emotional intelligence in after school programming and locally, helps kids at Chicora Elementary, North Charleston Elementary, James Simons Elementary and Memminger Elementary Schools.

Along with WINGS founder, Ginny Deerin, who started the nonprofit as a summer camp in 1996, WINGS is now soaring to new heights and Bridget Laird is along for the ride.

Q: Why did you and your high school sweetheart, now husband Mike, decide to move to Charleston?

A: He played baseball at College of Charleston and I played soccer at N.C. State. We would make trips back and forth to see each other. Once we finished college, we decided Charleston is a great place to live because we didn't want to move back to Pittsburgh, because we were done with cold weather.

Q: Tell me how you got the job at WINGS for Kids.

A: It was totally random. I answered an ad out of the newspaper. It was my first job out of college and when I started it was just Ginny and I working out of her basement on Sullivan's Island. WINGS is 15 years old and for the first two years,

it was a summer camp just for girls. But when I started, Ginny was transitioning it into after-school programs for boys and girls. At first, I was a catch-all for everything, there was only two of us at the time running a nonprofit, so we both did everything – programs, payroll, you name it!

Q: WINGS now has 17 full-time employees and 42 part-time employees, talk about growing! How has working there helped you grow?

A: I love that I get up every morning for a job where my goal is to help kids. There's some people that may get up and not like their job or work but I'm lucky enough to be able to help children. The job has also made me a much better parent. Since we teach kids how to make decisions, life skills and more, I've learned so much through the years and 100 percent without a doubt, I'm a better parent thanks to WINGS.

Q: How? Can you get me an example?

A: WINGS is all about social and emotional learning and recognizing emotions. When my daughter Reese was 2 (she's now 7), she had to get a round of shots. All my friends were telling me it would be a terrible appointment. So I sat her down before we went to the appointment and said, "You're going to get shots, they're going to hurt and may feel a little nervous and your stomach is going to feel a little weird. When you feel nervous, take deep breaths." Once we got in the room, she looked at me and said, "nervous, nervous" and she did her deep breaths. The whole appointment went smoothly. That's when I knew I was using the same techniques we teach in our programs, it's all about recognizing emotions instead of just saying, "let's go, it's OK."

Q: So how do you spend your free time?

A: We're die-hard Pittsburgh Steelers fans. We have a whole ritual on Sundays. Twelve people come over and we all wear our jerseys and we have to sit in the same place every Sunday. My favorite player is Heath Miller. Our 6-and-a-half-month old son is named Heath, but I promise it's not because of him. We also love the beach. We go boating a lot. We're outside people except on Sundays!

Q: Did you imagine your life would be like this when you were fresh out of college in a new city?

A: Yes and no... I knew I always wanted to help people but I didn't know exactly what that meant. Probably because I was a sports and recreation management major, I thought maybe I'd do something with sports and children. But I believe the lessons being learned at WINGS can be learned through sports too.

Q: Who are your role models or mentors?

A: I would have to say Ginny Deerin. I admire her dedication and hard work. She is pioneer and a forward thinker. When she wanted to step down as CEO, I wasn't interested in the job and told her no. But then I thought about it, if not me then who? She already had a plan. I had put all my life and passion into this. I knew I needed to step up and believe in myself.

Q: What's the next step for you and WINGS?

A: Wow! The University of Virginia received a \$2.8 million grant to study the impact of WINGS. It will be a serious, controlled trial research study for four years that starts 2012. At the end of those four years, we want it to show that what we're doing is scientifically proven that we're making a difference on the kids we're serving. Secondly, we plan on expanding outside of Charleston and have looked at cities like Baltimore, Atlanta and Charlotte. We'll make it official in January. Eventually, I want to be in five or six regions in the country, serving thousands of kids.

Q: What adjectives describe you?

A: Optimistic, energetic, silly, disciplined and motivated.

Q: You seem to work a lot! If you had one wish what would it be?

A: I would love to go to Hawaii with my husband, just the two of us. *