

# short stories *behind the work, the life*

BY SHEREE CLARK

"The universe is made of stories, not atoms."—Muriel Rukeyser, poet

Even the most public people have private lives. An entire profession—paparazzi—would not exist if the rest of the world weren't fascinated by how the famous spend their personal time. In this issue we continue to glimpse into the lives of our colleagues. This time: Sonia Greteman.

Sonia has built her Wichita, Kan., branding agency, Greteman Group, into an industry leader. The firm she founded in 1989 now offers marketing, advertising, PR, interactive design and environmental support. Sonia's clients—including Fortune 500 companies, entrepreneurial start-ups and everything between—span the globe, from Bombardier Aerospace in Montreal to Royal Caribbean Cruises in Miami. Sonia's long list of personal achievements ranges from a special governor's appointment to an advertising lifetime achievement award. Sonia bravely stepped forward to share, in her own words, a few of the lessons she's learned in the past two decades.



## FIRST LESSON: YOU LEARN BY DOING

I was a tall, lanky, hyperactive kid, *and* I had a father who really wanted a boy. Dad loved sports, so from an early age I was more his son than daughter. I played Catholic school intramural sports from the moment I could dribble a basketball. Playing sports as a child influenced me as much as anything. On the field or the court you learn many lessons—about actually seeing victory in order to achieve it, about trusting in your teammates, about never letting the opponent see you cry.

I was the active sunrise-to-sunset kid trying to cram it all in. Playing ball, drawing, painting, sewing and putting on fashion shows. I was the class president and a professional troublemaker. One night my friends and I got this crazy idea to sneak out of the house about 2:00 in the morning, climb to the top of my hometown's water tower—over a rather tall barbed-wire fence—and paint it with my signature moon-and-star design. Later I put myself through college by painting portraits of people who had money, wall space and a thankfully not-too-refined artistic sense.

My father, a professional aviation photographer for more than 40 years, taught me his craft the old-fashioned way. Working as his darkroom slave allowed me to understand the mechanics underlying the magic. Hanging film to dry. Dodging and burning photos to get the contrast just so. Watching images appear under the watery developer. I understood early on that vision is nothing without the effort to see it realized.

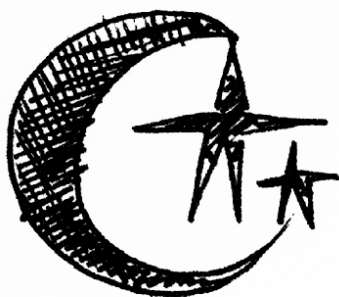


ABOVE LEFT: Sonia in front an Oklahoma City Zoo exhibit, designed by Greteman Group in 2007.

ABOVE RIGHT: Sonia and her father Ken Greteman in 1960. Ken was a photographer at Boeing for 40 years.

## SECOND LESSON: CLOTHE YOURSELF IN FUCHSIA

Early in my career, I worked at Boeing in Wichita, as had my father before me. The job offered good pay and benefits. The other 25,000-plus workers seemed glad to be there. Yet it was absolutely, positively not the right place for me. I would show up to work in



**CLOCKWISE FROM LEFT:** Proud of her 1983 Design Centre fashion show display, Greteman strikes a pose. An op-art inspired shot of her as an art student in 1979. She dons a “power suit” for this 1989 portrait to commemorate the launch of Gardner, Greteman and Mikulecky. (In 1994 the firm was renamed Greteman Group after Mikulecky and Gardner had moved on.) Engagement photo with soon-to-be husband Chris Brunner, 1984. (She reports it was “the wildest engagement pic to ever appear in the Derby newspaper!”) The moon-and-star design that graced a Kansas water tower after a post-midnight escapade.

huge African turbans and outrageous punk-rock costumes. I was bored. People still comment on what a riot I was. (To this day, I can’t believe I did that, and my bosses let me get away with it. Maybe they were bored, too.) When I turned in my resignation, a colleague gave me the best compliment I’d ever received, saying I was “fuchsia silk in a gray-flannel world.”

I took a substantial pay cut—to the dismay of my father—and strutted my confident, and OK, maybe even cocky self to a quirky little tradeshow-design firm. I interviewed with a handsome artist/sculptor ... who would become my boss, and later, my husband. I flirted: I got the job. There I joyously toiled in the trenches alongside people who taught me how to problem-solve in a 3D environment.

One day—well, actually 36 hours straight—we worked ourselves to exhaustion to get a fantasy Christmas wonderland out the door. It was pure hell, but I loved it. No sleep, bad food, a handsome distraction, all the while creating holiday weirdness by adding glitter to fairies and painting faces on mechanical elves. No wonder I feel the way I do about Christmas. My future husband stayed up the next night sculpting this goat for a Biblical manger. The next day we all came in and found him sleeping on the floor, goat at his feet. We called him Goat Boy the Martyr ... just not to his face.

We still drive by that manger 25 years later. Be careful what you put out there: It might be around for a long, long time. I will never forget my first “design” job, paying my dues and finding my soul

mate. He left the tradeshow firm several years later and got a job that provided a steady paycheck, enabling me to start my business.

### THREE: BE GLAD YOU HAVE SPELL-CHECK

You don’t know what you don’t know. As a young designer in a tiny firm (actually just me and my boss), I got to be the AE, the designer, the writer and the proofreader. Now, I’ve always liked control, so it was just fine with me. My first major clients were these really cool gay guys, who were opening a new “society” restaurant. I did everything—the client meetings, the logo, the menus and a full-page ad announcing the not-to-be-missed “gayla” opening. The minute the ad hit the paper, the client’s phone started ringing with readers wanting to know if the headline was secret code announcing Wichita’s new gay club. I had misspelled *gala* in 120-point type. I was mortified ... but even worse, the clients refused to pay for the ad, and my boss had to cover the cost. It was an expensive way for me to learn how to spell. But I sure did. Now I know how to spell an even more important word—*proofreader*.

### FOUR: A BOD FOR DESIGN & A HEAD FOR BUSINESS

People who have believed in me have populated my life. I’ve got this odd combination of creative moxy and business acumen. I learned early on to make it fun for clients to do business with us, to present concepts quickly to busy people, and to get the billing out

## short stories



**TOP LEFT:** Sonia (top row, third from left) was a member of the All Saints Basketball team in 1972. Her father, Ken Greteman, was coach.

**BOTTOM LEFT:** A hot babe and a hot car: Sonia in 1976 with her AMC Javelin.

**TOP RIGHT:** Sonia with pilot and friend Chris Pratt, who is showing off his custom-built Van's aircraft with a Greteman Group-designed paint scheme.

**BOTTOM RIGHT:** Sonia with Greteman Group vice president Deanna Harms in Milan, Italy, during a photo shoot for *Bombardier Contrails Magazine*.


even quicker. I have always believed my work had value, so I was bold about charging a going rate. I know that if the dollars don't work, neither do you. I once read that Oprah Winfrey signed every check her business issued. So did I for years and years. And at any given time I can give you an agency snapshot, receivables, billables and client history. That sort of fixation on the bottom line has served me well. Clients respected me, because I wasn't just another designer wanting to win an award (although I've won my share); I was watching out for their budgets and for my own. What can I say? When dealing with numbers—and clothes and cars—black has always appealed to me more than red!

I've often quoted the German engineer and aviation trailblazer Otto Lilienthal, who said, "To invent an airplane is nothing. To build one is something. To fly is everything." I share a similar philosophy. Awards and great work are something, but results are everything.

### CODA: DESIGN FILLS MY LIFE

Work still heats my blood and fills my life. I love the creative pro-

cess, whether it's designing a clean-sheet identity for a jewelry line or something as monumental as a history-of-aviation exhibit. And I've learned to surround myself with inspiring, passionate, fun people. My favorite Friday evening includes our garden, a glass of wine and my husband discussing our work, critiquing each other's projects and brainstorming new ones. But I've also learned you need balance and a little downtime. I find that working in our Asian garden, doing yoga and traveling all help me to refuel. Travel especially has been a fabulous teacher: a photo safari in Africa, a behind-the-scenes immersion tour of Japanese art and architecture, drinking in Mexican textiles, exploring the art of Russia, savoring the back roads of the Italian wine country. I revere other cultures, past and present.

I'm a firm believer in not reinventing the wheel, but in learning from others. And from my earliest days, I've hated to spin my wheels. I want to feel the wind on my face. My journey's just beginning. It always includes design. It's not just my business; it's my life. 

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