

## **Michele Zapple**

Lynne Herndon caught up Michele as she headed north in July 2018, as she does every year.

Michele Zapple creates. She dances. She choreographs. And she loves children.

Michele is on Cape Cod, where she is spending the next three weeks at the Harwich Junior Theater as choreographer for the play "Tom Sawyer," along with her husband Rob, who is director. Theater is in the Zapples' blood, as this summer is the 35th time they have participated in this 68 year-old tradition. Their 11 year-old grandson will perform this summer. It's all in the family.

Michele and Rob (New Hanover County Commissioner) moved to Wilmington 21 years ago from Los Angeles after the Northridge earthquake. With three young children, and at ages 40 and 45, they were looking for a safer place to raise their family. A builder and actor, Rob visited North Carolina, thinking Raleigh might be a good place to settle, but someone mentioned Wilmington. On his first day in town, he met Tony Rivenbark. Later that week he heard Tony on NPR and realized it was meant to be. Without jobs, they charged forth and built a great life in Wilmington.

Michele said, "We wanted a quieter life. We love Wilmington, its theater history, and the presence of public radio. The growth of the city is overwhelmingly positive,

and native Wilmingtonians will let you know they are natives. They are proud of the city."

Michele owns Carolina Gymnastics Academy with partner Rebecca Bishop. Building on her achievements as a competitive gymnast, she became a coach, as her mother and sister had been, and as her daughter is now. Starting in 2000, the academy grew from a one van, 5 kid to a 5 van, 90 kid after school learning center. In the mornings, the academy is open to 3-5 year olds for preschool education. Michele loves children. "My job is to make children's lives richer and better. Who really knows what goes on in the lives of kids? I try to say something kind, and to be involved in my students' lives. Children are our future, and we can help them grow and thrive physically and emotionally," Michele said.

"When we got here, Rob was into everything. He was Atticus Finch in "To Kill a Mockingbird," at the Thalian. I got into Smart Start and the Carousel Center. At the time I joined WIN, Patricia Lawler was in charge. I always donate where children are involved. So WIN was a natural for me because together with other women I could have a bigger impact on the welfare of children in the community."

Another feature of WIN that attracted Michele is accountability. "WIN has excellent follow-up with its grants. It's gratifying to hear how our money has brought change and benefit to various groups. Joining WIN has increased my awareness of community issues and taught me where the need and opportunity is."

An important byproduct of WIN for Michele was the empowerment of women. "When I started my business, it was all new to me. I had a very difficult time getting the loan I needed. The mother of one of my students turned out to not to be a bank teller, as I thought, but the VP of a bank, and she helped me get my loan. There ARE women with power and financial resources who can help each other with access and connection. Men had it, and women could have it too."

"The first meeting of the WIN founding members was held at lunchtime, which felt indulgent as many of us worked. We were mostly strangers. Some of us had our own money, others had their husbands'. But all of us were committed to children's issues, we were empowered by our connection to each other, and we were proud to be women making a difference. That is how Guardian ad Litem came to be our first grant recipient."

Michele thinks WIN's approach to membership and participation is just right. "You can join, donate, study the grant proposals, and vote. That amount of involvement is OK with WIN. Or, in addition, you can join a committee and attend all the social functions. It's nice to have those options." And she approves of WIN's growth and therefore its ability to give more grants. "More is better for community impact. Join WIN!"