



An author, a curator, an employee at a world-renowned institution. These would be ambitious endeavors for one person. Paula Johnson has done them all. This former New Ulm citizen has collaborated on numerous note-worthy projects and not forgotten her roots. Paula clearly has a work ethic straight out of New Ulm.

Paula attended New Ulm High School from 1968 – 1972. Even at this age, she was curious about the world, so she participated in Spanish and foreign language club. She possessed leadership abilities that were honed through on the debate team, where she won an award with her partner Nancy Ostrem.

Paula also enjoyed the arts, participating as a clarinetist and bassoon player in band and as a member of the select choir, Bel Canto, and a vocal soloist.

After graduating from high school, Paula enrolled at Gustavus Adolphus College and received a degree in English. Before graduate school, she worked as an intern and an administrative assistant at the Library of Congress and volunteered on the 1976 presidential campaign. She then went to school at the University of Texas in Austin for her master’s degree in Anthropology and Folklore with a focus on cultural anthropology.

After working for ten years at a small museum on the Chesapeake Bay, Paula’s life-long love for words and stories (“books, books, and more books, please!”) eventually led her all the way to the Smithsonian National Museum of American History where she became a curator in the division of work and industry. Since her time at the Smithsonian began, she has been a part of multiple exhibitions, helping to bring Julia Child’s home kitchen to the museum, curating an exhibit on the major technological and social changes since World War II that transformed how and what Americans eat, and was project director of an exhibition featuring stories from America’s maritime history.

Through all of this, Paula has continued to write. She authored and co-authored several books on the fisheries of the Chesapeake Bay, traditional work boats, and maritime communities. She has lectured widely on these and topics related to field research, oral history recording, and documentation.

Paula is highly respected by her colleagues and friends. She works enthusiastically at her job and is proud to feature New Ulm and Minnesota in her assignments to add personal insights to the stories that she tells. Through these stories, she shows the world the importance of preserving our history. She shows us that as we continue to learn about the past, we also learn about ourselves. And she shows us how far a high quality education can take an individual full of curiosity and the desire to learn.

