

The State Journal-Register (Springfield, IL) February 21, 2005 Monday

Copyright 2005 The State Journal-Register
The State Journal-Register (Springfield, IL)

February 21, 2005 Monday

SECTION: CITY/STATE; Pg. 10

LENGTH: 814 words

HEADLINE: Part of the game plan;
Chatham resident heads **governor's video game** task force

BYLINE: AMANDA REAVY STAFF WRITER

DATELINE: CHATHA

BODY:

Christine Westerlund is a self-proclaimed fan of video games. The 44-year-old mother of two said she grew up playing Pac-Man and Atari. However, the games her children can choose today are much more graphic and violent.

Westerlund found such games in her home. "I was quite shocked," she said. "(My children's) friends play them and talk about them and, of course, then they become curious, and they rent them or purchase them."

As one of about two dozen members of the Governor's Safe Games Illinois Task Force, the Chatham resident hopes to prevent such shock from happening to other parents.

The task force was recently formed to come up with ways to reach out to parents about the dangers of violent and sexually explicit video games.

The committee, appointed by Gov. Rod Blagojevich, is made up of parents from across the state, along with community leaders, medical experts, clergy, teachers and child advocates.

Blagojevich has proposed legislation to ban anyone under the age of 18 from renting or purchasing violent and sexually explicit video games.

Westerlund said her role as the task force's "convener" is to keep its meetings focused and ensure all parties have a say. She also acts as a liaison between the task force and the governor's office.

In an interview last week, Westerlund said she believes her greatest asset to lead the task force is her experience as a mother.

"I am cognizant of the fact that my kids' world today is very different than the world I was brought up in," Westerlund said. "I hope to equip myself and other parents on some of the potential dangers that can influence our children."

The issue of appropriate content for children is very important to her, and she said she is optimistic the task force will successfully raise parental awareness of the dangers that exist.

"The task force is made up of a lot of dedicated people," she said. "These are citizens who have a strong interest in the safety of our kids. I'm excited to be a part of it."

Her children are not as enthusiastic.

When Westerlund's 12-year-old son learned of his mother's new position, he commented, "So now you're going to take away all of my video games," she said.

Her 15-year-old daughter also was worried.

"I assured them I'm not going to take their games away and tell them they're bad and tell their friends they're bad," she said.

As long as the content is suitable, Westerlund said she supports her children continuing to play video games.

She feels very fortunate she was able to discover the inappropriate material her children were viewing, especially considering she works full time, she said.

"With working parents, they're very busy, and there is stress on parents every day," she said. "I took it upon myself to educate myself."

Westerlund has worked for four years as a training specialist with the Illinois Community Action Association, which serves the needs of low-income citizens throughout the state. Her job entails providing outreach for family and community development and outcome management.

The Henry native graduated from Eastern Illinois University with a degree in history and always had an interest in public service, she said.

Westerlund began working after college at the Illinois Commerce Commission and later for the village of Chatham, where she was in charge of coordinating recycling and recreational programs. She organized summer activities for children and planned and oversaw the construction of a playground in the village.

"As a mom, I always knew safety was a big issue, but when you're responsible for a large group of kids, it really hits home," she said.

Westerlund is on the board of trustees for the Chatham Area Public Library District and a member of the Triangle Center board. She also is an elder at Chatham Presbyterian Church. Her husband, Tom Smith, is employed at the Illinois Commerce Commission.

Joyce Probst, the governor's senior policy development adviser for housing, recommended Westerlund for the task force. Probst had worked with Westerlund for two years at the ICAA.

"I knew she was very involved in parenting her children and just a great leader in her community," Probst said, further describing her as very focused, organized and well educated on the issue of video game content.

"She has been working on this issue for several years, and she has already gotten over the learning humps," Probst said.

Probst, who has an 8-year-old son, said she is comforted by the fact that Westerlund has older children and already has learned how to monitor the games they play and how to determine which games are appropriate.

"She has a lot of interest in her son and her daughter and is thoughtful to what (they are) exposed

to," she said. "She also has the bigger picture of the needs of the state. I think she'll be a great asset to the task force."