

# LIFESTYLE



SHARON MCMAHON

FORMER TEACHER & CREATOR OF @SHARONSAYSSO

Screenshot / Comedy Central

"The Daily Show" host Trevor Noah's interview with Duluth's Sharon McMahon aired Monday.

## LESSONS IN GOVERNMENT

Duluth woman goes viral with Instagram account that slays conspiracies

By Melinda Lavine  
mlavine@duluthnews.com

Sharon McMahon's 18-year-old son and his friends watched her on "The Daily Show with Trevor Noah" on Monday.

While her son called with accolades from college, there is, at times, a lukewarm reception at home. "My daughters 16 and 13, they're just a little bit more reserved about it. I'm not that cool to them.

"Nothing keeps you humble like adolescent children," McMahon said with a laugh.

This fall, the former teacher launched @SharonSaysSo, an Instagram account for nonpartisan, fact-based information on the U.S. government.

Overnight, her professional photography profile went from pictures of babies and high school grads to humorous and easily digestible videos and posts debunking conspiracy theories, or explaining whataboutism and the difference between bias and lies.

"My goal is never to get people to think like I think. My goal is to provide you with fact-based, nonpartisan information, so you can form your own educated opinions," she said.

For her more than 500,000 followers, McMahon posts daily Q&As and summaries of national events. She answers direct questions and hosts virtual workshops — and it all comes with character.

On @SharonSaysSo, McMahon talks about the electoral college by using a wire basket and a wooden bin. In a video illustrating presidential vs. congressional power, she uses a tiny stuffed sheep



Photo courtesy of McMahon

Sharon McMahon

and rabbit. Later, she breaks into a King Arthur accent.

In other clips, she can be seen dancing with captions overhead or mouthing a Paul Simon song. Often, there are other wardrobe changes or fun filters, along with off-shoot posts about whales, make-up or that time she sat in a SCOTUS hearing with Ruth Bader Ginsburg.

McMahon aims for her page to not just be super professional 24/7.

"It's fun to have a laugh and fun to talk about bald eagles.

"When you're in a classroom, you want to get to know your teacher. You want that personal connection," she said.

And it's resonating.

Along with her half a million followers and a "Daily Show" interview, McMahon has also appeared in The Washington Post, Upworthy and on CNN. She's launching a podcast in May, and her first book is in the works.

LESSONS: Page C2

## Brochure is money spent on memories

I should have known better. A few weeks ago, I decided to visit an online auction site. I entered the search word "Duluth," clicked on the little drop down box labeled "antiques and collectibles" and started to browse. This always leads to trouble. Or at the very least, a draining of my bank account.

I always have to scroll past an insane amount of postcards to find anything else, but once I do, I'm always intrigued. This time, I found a Duluth Lodging and Dining brochure from May 1981. I don't know what I expected to find in this brochure (certainly not anything I didn't already know) but because it sported retro brown lettering printed on that one shade of orange that was used only in the '70s and early '80s (albeit extensively), I suddenly found myself out \$7 plus shipping.

Once in my hands, it was as glorious in real life as I'd hoped it would be. The dated orange and brown did the trick, setting my brain firmly on "nostalgia." The first thing I read, however, threw me for a loop. The brochure was titled: "Duluth: One Great Lake and a whole lot more." The strange capitalization aside, was that a slogan in the 1980s? I have no memory of this phrase. Nevertheless, I soldiered on, enjoying the word cloud of place names and logos gracing the cover. It was like a who's who of my childhood.

Inside, the left-hand side listed lodging, the right-hand side, dining. In 1981, a motel room in downtown Duluth (a rare breed today) rented for as little as \$18 per night. In a nod to Duluth's tourist-based future, however, the price went up to \$21 a night over the summer months.

The Buena Vista still offered a panoramic view at a reasonable price. "Motel Row" on London Road was still alive and well, with eight motels listed along eight blocks, from the London Manor Motel at 1801 London Road to the Flamette at 2621 London Road. All boasted color TVs and direct-dial phones, right in the rooms.

MURPHY: Page C10

## 'Normalcy' returns to family theater

Duluth Playhouse offers in-person tickets for 'Charlotte's Web'

By Christa Lawler  
clawler@duluthnews.com

With its family theater production of "Charlotte's Web," the Duluth Playhouse is doing something it hasn't attempted since it pulled "Matilda" mid-run last March: It's staging a production in front of a live audience — a smaller and more

distanced audience, but an audience nonetheless.

"It's brought back so much nostalgia," said Kaylee Peck, whose black mask painted with white spider webs is part costume, part safety protocol. "It felt like this past year, everything was on hold, like I was living in some alternate reality.

### IF YOU GO

"Charlotte's Web" plays at 1 p.m. and 4 p.m. Feb. 27-28 and March 6-7. Tickets are \$17 for adults, \$15 for youths in-person. A streaming option March 13-14 is \$12 per household. Go to duluthplayhouse.org.

To come into the theater, like I've been doing for six years now, my body naturally respond-

ed with, 'I'm ready for theater, I'm ready to be here.'

"It felt so good to be back."

"Charlotte's Web" will be served two ways: as an in-person show with the 280-seat Depot-based theater at 25% maximum capacity, or streamed for audience members at home.

THEATER: Page C2



Photo courtesy of Duluth Playhouse

The Duluth Playhouse Family Theatre's "Charlotte's Web" marks the return of audiences.

# LESSONS

From Page C1

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Political science related to American government has been a long-lived passion for McMahon.

"I was the kid paying for Newsweek subscriptions with my own babysitting money," she said.

At the University of Minnesota Duluth, she was the president of the political science association.

McMahon said she is drawn to constitutional law because: "The way you have to think about using this almost 250-year-old document to answer questions of today, that is very interesting to me."

After student-teaching in the Northland, McMahon's first professional education job was in St. Paul. She later taught primarily 10th-through 12th-graders in the San Francisco Bay area and a Maryland suburb of D.C., she said.

McMahon and her family returned to Duluth after the consolidation of high schools and subsequent teacher layoffs. "I knew moving back here, I was going to be leaving the classroom, and that was a tradeoff I was willing to make. But I never stopped loving teaching, and I have always missed it," she said.

Among the values she brought from the front of the class to social media: "My goal was to leave the classroom with students having no idea how I voted." And that's how she runs @SharonSaysSo.

In the runup to the 2020 election, McMahon noticed an influx of misinformation about how the government works, what the electoral college does and more. She posted a refresher on the latter to her Instagram account Sept. 11, 2020.

People asked for a weekly video. That led to a couple filmed Q&As. Soon after came the calls from TV and radio stations.

The upward trajectory skyrocketed as the election



Screenshot / Comedy Central

"The Daily Show" ran a clip from Sharon McMahon's Instagram account in which she explains the U.S. electoral college.

ramped up. "We had a lot of division, a lot of things that were unclear. ... My account became a place where people could go to understand the facts of the matter without being told what they should think about those facts."

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Today, she's responding to timely topics — minimum wage or the proposed stimulus bill — as well as inquiries about basic functions of government.

Many have anxiety or suspicion about Googling information; some have difficulty plucking out disreputable sources, and many fear asking a question and appearing stupid. (In one of her clips, McMahon encourages viewers to search sites that end in ".edu.")

Her page presents an opportunity for a one-on-one, judgment-free interaction where people can ask a real person and get an honest response, she said. "If you want to know the difference between Congress and the Senate, I will happily explain."

Her page followers hail from a variety of political beliefs.

In one of her Instagram stories, "Cons/lib," McMahon makes space for neutral communication by posing the question with screenshots of the responses:

What is something you wish people who lean right understood?

► "I am not anti Republican at all. I am anti Trump. There is a big difference."

► "That we want you to loudly condemn this if you're against it. Even if it's uncomfortable."

Also: "What is something you wish people who lean left understood?"

► "Just bc I'm a Republican doesn't mean I don't support BLM and other equality issues."

► "Ultimately, we just don't believe govt is functional / trustworthy enough to fix social probs."

McMahon said @ SharonSaysSo has shown her that the majority of people want similar things. We just have different ideas of the best way to get there.

"If you and your significant other both want to go out to dinner, and he or she wants to take the freeway, and you want to take the scenic route,

ultimately, you both want the same thing, which is going out to eat.

"Over and over, I see people from all sides of the political spectrum want safe communities; they want freedom; they want peace; they want prosperity; they want good jobs; they want a clean environment.

"We want to take care of old people; we want to take care of the sick. ... The ultimate goal is the same. When we can agree on that goal, we can have much more productive conversations," she said.

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In January, McMahon launched sharonmcmahon.com and began teaching Government for Grownups workshops, with topics ranging from how Congress works to Constitution 101.

During Tuesday's class, people logged in from New Orleans, Utah, Maryland and Oregon.

The Texans, McMahon greeted happily, pleased to see they had power. She then presented the authors of the Constitution, what's in it, what's missing and more with at least one shout-out to "Hamilton."

More than 10,000 people signed up for her workshops

in February. The numbers were so high, viewers weren't allowed in at one point, an issue that has since been resolved. "Too many people want to learn about the Constitution. That's a good problem to have," she said.

And so far, technical and infrastructural challenges are most prevalent — managing the demand for access to workshops or the volume of emails and incoming questions.

Hers is a small team composed of a longtime employee, a publicist, a web designer, and they'll soon be hiring one more.

As for her Instagram videos: "That's 100% me," she said.

When her Instagram account hit 50,000 followers, McMahon set her sights on a giveaway.

The first \$10,000 she raised went to Twin Ports organizations: CHUM, Safe Haven, CASDA, Life House, Salvation Army and local individuals.

Then she set a goal of \$5,000 intended for RIP Medical Debt, a nonprofit that buys medical debt in bulk at a discount to help relieve what people owe. Days later, her followers gave \$500,000, which buys \$50 million in debt.

McMahon recently launched an effort that connects Texans in need directly with those who want to help with supplies. There will be more fundraising in the future, and McMahon is in the process of forming a 501c3. She plans to launch her podcast, Government for Grownups, in May.

Among all that has happened and is to come, McMahon said, "The community that has formed, that is perhaps what I am most proud of."

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**ON INSTAGRAM:** [instagram.com/sharonsaysso](https://www.instagram.com/sharonsaysso)

**WATCH THE INTERVIEW:** Look for "The Daily Show with Trevor Noah" at [cc.com](https://www.cc.com). It's Season 26 E 62, Feb. 22, 2021.

# THEATER

From Page C1

It plays for a live audience at 1 p.m. and 4 p.m. Feb. 27-28 and March 6-7, and streams March 13-14.

For those who attend in person: Masks are required, temperatures will be checked at the door, and the lobby will allow for personal space, according to Amber Burns, family theater director.

"It's both really exciting and a little, 'Ohhh, are people going to buy tickets?'" Burns said.

Tickets are grouped in clusters of 2-4 seats and, as of Wednesday afternoon, there were still spots available.

After "Matilda" closed on March 13, the theater's keepers have been monitoring guidelines from the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, in addition to state mandates. They have plotted — with backup plans for the backup plans — and they have found ways to create.

Starting this past summer, the playhouse has held theater camps that have included a showcase as the finale.

There have been multiple productions offered virtually from the company's mainstage and, according to NorShor Theatre artistic director Phillip Fazio, they are working on a potential in-person event to be staged in the next few months.

"Charlotte's Web" was cast with the intention of offering the option of a live audience. Between its director, actors and

stage manager, there are 13 people involved with the show, a mix of children and adults.

Tasks that ordinarily would be filled by crew members, such as mopping and tending to props and sets, are falling on actors.

"It feels collaborative and supportive," Burns said.

Emily Lanik Parr, who recently adapted to COVID-10 circumstances by directing the old-timey "Vintage Hitchcock: A Live Radio Show" at Harbor City International School, said she didn't step lightly into leading this production.

"Amber and I met right away to say, 'How are we going to do this?'" she said. "From the get-go, we have to be the example. Is this the type of theater we are used to? Not fully, no. We can't be there yet. This has to be the in-between. We have to have a stepping stone back to normalcy."

"Charlotte's Web," based on the classic tale by E.B. White, is the story of Wilbur the piglet and his friendships within

the barn — including the titular spidery spelling champ bent on saving his life.

This is a play with tender moments, which Lanik Parr is trying to convey with actors safely spaced.

"It's not going to be necessarily what we're used to," she said. "I'm so big on character relationships and connecting and making meaning. For me, a lot of it is physical proximity; it's touch. I've had to really rethink how to get that meaning without having them physically touch."

Peck said she and Ben Peter, a friend from high school who plays Wilbur, are using socially distanced cues to show a high-five, a hug, a handshake.

"I've been loving those moments more than if it was a physical connection," she said. "Normal humans connect by being close to each other or putting a hand on a back or high-fiving. To have that be taken away and to survive a whole year not being able to do that and suddenly hav-

ing the opportunity to show you care for someone while staying safe brings raw, pure emotion to it.

"You wish you could be giving a hug, you wish you could give a high five. To have that bridge makes it all the more powerful."

The turnaround for this show has been speedy, according to Lanik Parr, who said they started on Feb. 1 and half of the cast was already off-book.

There were conversations with the cast about committing to the show and limiting, as much as possible, time spent in public.

Still, by mid-week before its opening, she said that she hadn't yet plugged the show on her

own social media. She was worried about jinxing it, she said.

"At a certain point, we're all just doing our best," she said. "I do

think people need it. The actors needed it. I needed it. The playhouse families from the family theater needed it, that sense of normalcy."

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