

# Power People: There's no room for groupthink on this CEO's team

BY TRACEY DRURY – SENIOR REPORTER, BUFFALO BUSINESS FIRST // PHOTO BY MARK MULVILLE



**Elizabeth Woike** didn't plan to spend her career working as a counselor and certainly didn't expect to become one of the region's most powerful female leaders. In fact, she chose to study geology and international studies during her time at Yale University.

Her goals changed when a Fulbright scholarship brought her to Costa Rica, which led to a stint in the Peace Corps in Africa. When she returned to Buffalo, she chose a master's in social work over law school, which has been followed by a 25-year career.

Woike has served since 2020 as CEO at BestSelf Behavioral Health. As chief operating officer, she helped to guide the 2017 merger between Lake Shore Behavioral Health and Child & Family Adolescent Treatment Services. The combined organization was later renamed as BestSelf.

Over the past year, she oversaw the opening of the new Scott Bieler Child Advocacy Center at BestSelf's Main Street headquarters, as well as the expansion of more health home programming and the addition of a new intensive crisis center.

In September, she began focusing more on strategy, advocacy and preservation of funding and partnerships when the president role shifted to a new executive at the agency.

**Power 200 Women rank: No. 21 // Power 250 rank: No. 39**

## What was the most pivotal moment in your life?

Probably the first pivotal moment was deciding to become a social worker.

**What's a lesson you learned from a mistake?**

In general as I've grown as a leader, it's been to listen to other people's advice more and be more collaborative, take feedback and not always worry about everyone else and pleasing others. As women, we're socialized that way and sometimes you just have to make the hard decisions. I've definitely learned that in my leadership journey.

**Have you had a strong mentor in your life?**

I always say it was my mother. My mother was one of the first female pastors in Western New York, and she led a church for 35 years, so she was a very strong leader. She worked very hard, worked all the time and was very service based, so that's where I really got my values. That meshed right into social work.

**What's your ultimate career goal?**

It's really about making an impact and making a difference in the community. I've started doing some mentoring and work with the Women's Foundation around other women leaders in the community and a little bit of coaching. I definitely plan to be at BestSelf for a while longer.

**What is your favorite thing to do in Buffalo?**

My daughter (Aisha) and I love to go thrifting on Elmwood. And also going to Shea's.

**What is your favorite place to eat in the metro area?**

We love Waxlight Bar a Vin and Lombardo's.

**What's an interesting fact about you that not everyone knows?**

I speak Spanish and French.

**What's one change you would make to improve Buffalo and Western New York?**

I think it would be bringing leaders together to really get people on the same page about what the future of Buffalo is and should be. I am optimistic about the new mayor doing some of that work, but there's a lot of people doing a lot of different things and not enough collaboration.

**What was your first job, and would you do it again?**

My first job was shelving books at the downtown library, and would I do that again? Absolutely. It's peaceful, it's quiet, and when the job is done, it's done. It's very fulfilling. I would do that again for sure.

**What is one thing you look for when hiring someone?**

I want someone who is going to bring a different perspective to the team and make us better. So it's not about fit; it's about adding value to the team. I definitely don't have groupthink on my team.

**How do you describe yourself as a boss?**

I'm definitely not a micromanager. I want people on my team who are independent but know when to ask for help and seek support.