

Reliving a Night to Remember: 2024 Gala Overview, Photos, and Speeches

Mar 04, 2024



More than 300 supporters and friends of Easterseals Serving Chicagoland and Greater Rockford (ECR) joined for our 2024 Embracing Abilities, Expanding Possibilities Gala on February 23rd. Learn more, see photos, read touching remarks and more.

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We are thrilled to announce that significant funds were raised to support our mission to transform the lives of early learners and individuals of all abilities through access to expert educational, family, and community support. Thank you to everyone who helped make this possible and be sure to scroll down to see photos and touching client testimonials from the evening!

A Night to Remember

The annual gala featured cocktails, dinner, live music, dancing, raffles, a live auction, remarks from special guests and more — all to benefit the programs and services of ECR. Leila Rahimi from NBC 5 Chicago exceeded an electrifying night. The crowd danced the night away to Maggie Speaks, a nationally recognized, award-winning band, and enjoyed delicious Italian delights from RoccoVino's. The night also included heartwarming testimonials from families receiving services at our [Child and Family Connections #8](#) and [Easterseals Academy](#). Scroll down to read the full testimonials!

Gratitude Beyond Measure to Ruth and Mike Richardson

Our cup runneth over with gratitude to Ruth and Mike Richardson who presented [HB Threads](#)—our social enterprise that provides employment opportunities, job training and life skills development for individuals with disabilities while providing the highest quality customized apparel, buttons, and magnets to customers—with a check for \$25,000. At the event, the couple received a replica of a plaque that will be placed at HB Threads at Easterseals Academy Tinley Park in their honor. In another unbelievable act of generosity, at the encouragement of Ruth and Mike, the audience matched their \$25K gift during our paddle raise.



Thank You to All Who Made This Night Possible

A very special thanks to all of our Gala Sponsors listed below, RoccoVino's, Maggie Speaks, Leila Rahimi, our Gala Committee members, our Board of Directors, donors, vendors, guests, and the volunteers who ensured the night ran smoothly.

Our Gala Sponsors



A Night Captured in Stills

In addition to the select photos below, you can see many, many more photos on our [Facebook page album](#).

Testimonials from Clients

- Valeria, Mom, CFC #8

"My team of therapists at Child & Family Connections #8 helped my children thrive in ways I didn't think was possible. My 6-year-old son Julio has limb defects and is hearing impaired. I doubted my son could crawl, talk, problem solve ... but those amazing people paved the way for him to do all those things in his own unique ways. During our sessions, Julio can do the simplest things like completing a puzzle on his own and his team will jump in excitement, which gives him the courage to keep doing more. They gave my son the independence he needed.

They not only helped my son, but also taught me that anything was possible with time and patience.

My son, Ebrahim (Ebe), who just turned three years old, was recently diagnosed with autism. It wasn't easy this time around. I saw multiple signs that something wasn't quite right for your typical toddler. I was told by many people, 'He's still young, he'll grow out of it,' 'give it time,' or even, 'you're just looking for something,' but I trusted my gut, and I emailed my previous service coordinator, Mary. She hopped on it and started on his case, and not one time did she hesitate or question me.

It took some time for Ebe to get adjusted to his therapy sessions. Being autistic comes with not so happy days, but over time he enjoyed them too much and would ask for them daily!

CFC# taught me something very valuable: Parenthood is about raising and celebrating the children you have, not the children you thought you'd have.

Child & Family Connections #8 not only helped my children, but they opened my eyes and taught me something very valuable: Parenthood is about raising and celebrating the children you have, not the children you thought you'd have. It's about understanding your child is exactly the person they are supposed to be.

Thank you to this whole organization for the amount of help we've received. Without them, I don't know how I ever would have done it. We will forever be grateful for everyone involved."

- **Dawn, Mom, Easterseals Academy Chicago Campus**

"My son, Joseph, started at Easterseals Academy Chicago in the summer of 2019. Prior to coming to Easterseals, he was enrolled at a traditional high school with a low incidence program. My son is a happy guy most of the time, but like everyone he has days that are, let's euphemistically call them not so smiley.' At the other school, however, those days were becoming more frequent.

His educational journey up to that point had been a challenging one. The school he was attending no longer suited him, and we needed to find something new for him and quickly. Of course, I had heard of Easterseals Academy and their wonderful reputation, but I really didn't think it was an option for us. Well, as luck or fate would have it, our BCBA at the time had interned here and highly recommended the school. I trusted her judgement, took a chance, and called to see if there were any available openings for my then 17-year-old.

Fast forward a bit, we spoke with the principal at the time Rose DeCanniere. Before our initial meeting, I can honestly tell you that I was beyond worried that this would be more of the same and that we would be told that our semi-sweet baby boy in so many words would be 'too much' for the school. I just knew we would be starting from the beginning again. I could not have been more wrong. Rose listened to our concerns, and we talked about what transitioning to the school would look like and what the next steps would be. I remember leaving that meeting and feeling—for the first time in a long time—hopeful about my son's educational journey.

Before Joseph began at the school, we had a chance to connect with one of the people who has had the most significant impact on our experience here, and, in my very biased opinion, one of the absolute best teachers ever, Mike Hubert. Mike put us at ease almost immediately. He asked all the questions, and we were forthcoming about all the things that make Joseph, well Joseph. There was no hesitation or apprehension that we could sense, just understanding. That was the beginning of a very collaborative and strong parent/teacher partnership.

After a few years, Joseph was moved to another classroom, but Mike stayed involved during and after his transition to the new room and we won the teacher lottery again with Melissa Ramirez who is just as amazing. Now my son is back with Mike, and that partnership continues.

To be clear, everything has not always smooth sailing, my baby experiences challenges like we all do from time to time, but what I can say is that his teachers; the paraprofessionals like Terrence, Aaron and others; the speech pathologists; occupational therapists; and BCBAs have done all they can to make my son feel encouraged, supported and uplifted.

Joseph absolutely loves school.

This was not always a given. I have seen improvements with each new skill that he learns and tasks that he masters. I feel my son's pride in his accomplishments, and I am always kept up to date with any news.

As his time here draws to a close and we look forward to his future elsewhere, my family will take all that Easterseals Academy has given us and cherish every moment. I know Joseph is prepared for life

outside of these walls and will shine wherever he goes next.

I want to make sure that you know how much this school and the staff mean to us and how thankful we are that there was an opening when I made that call four years ago. I will end by saying that I will never be able to fully express the depth of my gratitude, but I am so happy that the school is here to hopefully provide that same experience for another student."