

Board Member Q&A: Desiree Vargas Wrigley drives innovation and entrepreneurship in Chicago communities

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Overview

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How did you get involved with Easterseals Serving Chicagoland and Greater Rockford? Why is it important to you?

One of my entrepreneurial friends and investor friends reached out and introduced me to [President and CEO] Sara. I was impressed with her progress so far from a fiscal perspective but also in her vision for what the next chapter of Easterseals Serving Chicagoland and Greater Rockford could look like. I was intrigued about the sustainability piece and how we make sure that the things that generate resources for the organization can be amplified and sustained and improved upon over time, and so, I just felt aligned with my experience as a founder – building ventures and brands and thinking about how to engage different stakeholders.

My nephew is also on the autism spectrum. Over the last few years, I've gotten to know what a well-resourced, well-connected version of support can look like. From other friends, I have seen how difficult it can be to navigate – not just in our city but across the country – the conflicting suggestions and resources that are being provided. I feel compelled to play a bigger role in the growing audience that identifies as being on the autism spectrum.

What kinds of skills do you hope to bring to the board that is different than what others might have?

One of the things that I anchor against in my day job is this concept of stakeholder-centric design. So, before you build anything, think about who benefits when we succeed and solve this problem and then think about how those stakeholders would want to engage and would most benefit. I'm looking forward to playing a more creative role on the board in the stakeholder-centric design piece. Having built two social ventures, I also understand the intersection of building something that generates revenue but also has a social impact. I think, through Harrysbuttons and maybe some of the other training programs, that there is an opportunity to better fund the core work.

What are you most excited about for the future of the affiliate? What do you see as coming next?

As the national narrative on what it means to be a person with a disability or a person who identifies on the autism spectrum grows and we as a culture or society have more of an understanding, I think that we're going to create more and more opportunities. There's a pretty meaningful opportunity in Chicago for us to be a part of that talent conversation. It's not just about early education, but it's also about helping young adults transition into careers that capitalize on their skills and where they have unique capacities and capabilities that we might not have thought about as talent pool before.

What do you love most about living in the Chicagoland area?

I love the diversity of backgrounds, thoughts, and socioeconomics— like the confluence of all these different backgrounds and ideas that come together in different areas. From our restaurant scene, which is so robust and vibrant and representative of so many different flavors and countries and regions, to the kinds of music festivals that we have around the city.

What conversation are you most excited to start as a new member of the board?

I've only served on my own boards before, and they've been for-profit boards. What I love about this opportunity is that I can help champion a different mindset around non-profit boards. Being on a nonprofit board isn't just about giving back, it's about caring about investing in your city. Your time is one of the most precious assets you can offer. I want to encourage other founders and tech-ecosystem players to think about their time differently than just painting a wall in a one-off volunteer opportunity and thinking more potentially about the skills that they can bring to our nonprofit sector.