

Board Member Q&A: Thea Durfee Polancic Makes a Difference Through Leadership Development

Mar 26, 2024



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We recently welcomed several new board members to our Easterseals Serving Chicagoland and Greater Rockford Board. We want to give you a better sense of who they are and why they serve.

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Tell us a little bit about yourself?

My husband, Frank, and I have been married for more than 20 years and we live in the Andersonville neighborhood of Chicago with our 19-year old son, Max. Max is a student at Columbia College in video game design, and is also on the autism spectrum which we learned at Columbia is called an “invisible disability”. In 2002, I started our firm ClearSpace with my partners; we specialize in helping leaders, teams, and organizations grow and fulfill on their purpose. Our specialty is high-performance team coaching. I spend most of my time one-on-one with CEOs and executive directors and their leadership teams, helping them grow as human beings, collaborate better and achieve great results. We work with diverse organizations across industries of all sizes – everything from Fortune 500 companies and professional sports teams, to fine arts organizations and mission-driven non-profits.

How did you come to serve as an ECR board member?

When I saw the mission of ECR, I was all in. My son is on the autism spectrum and came up through Chicago Public Schools, so being able to give back to an organization that does so much for children and the families of those with disabilities seemed like a great opportunity.

What impact do you hope to have on the board?

As the parent of a Chicago Public Schools graduate and a child with special needs, my firsthand experience and parent's point of view feels meaningful to the conversation. Along the way, we've interacted with many different agencies and service providers for individuals on the spectrum, so I hope that will provide helpful reference points too. Also, given my “day job” if there's a way I can help support the effectiveness and health of our Board, Leadership Team, and the organization, I'd be delighted to.

What speaks to you about ECR's two pillars of work: early learning and disability?

When our son Max was young and in his second year of early childhood education in a private school, we quickly realized that setting would not work for him. Even though it was a popular and well-regarded institution, they just weren't equipped to meet the needs of a kid like Max. We thought the best thing was to give him more time to develop at home, and for us to gain a better understanding of how he is wired. So he sat out that year and went through neurological testing. The following school year, we enrolled him in kindergarten at a CPS school, which was only a two-block walk from our house. He had a fantastic experience for the rest of his time through high school at CPS. They had the resources and expertise to support kids like him and provide a great environment for him to learn and become more independent over time. ECR is providing the kinds of resources in the early learning and disability space that make all the difference for families like mine.

Not everyone is touched by autism in their lives, and there can be a lot of misunderstanding. What do you think people most misunderstand about individuals on the autism spectrum?

There is that saying, "If you've met one person with autism, you've met one person with autism." Everybody's different and it's deeply personal - whether you were diagnosed as a child or recently discovered it for yourself as an adult. It's easy to label people, yet we all have so much complexity that none of us can be summed up in a single word.

What have you been listening to lately?

I'm a child of the eighties and love pop culture! I'm a big fan of Pop Culture Happy Hour on NPR and Sound Opinions from Chicago. I'm excited about Tana French's new novel coming out too. My graduate work was in Russian art, culture, literature, and linguistics, so a piece of me wants to know about everything. I'm pretty sure I already have more movies in my Netflix queue and books on my Goodreads list for a lifetime and then some.