

Leading with Curiosity: A Q&A with Stephanie Champi, Liaison to our Associate Board

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Easterseals Serving Chicagoland and Greater Rockford (ECR) recognizes the importance of building the leadership, engagement, and interest of early career professionals in the work of the organization.

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In this post, we discuss how Champi's prior teaching experience informs her current work in the education and equity space and what excites her about her new role with the ECR Associate Board.

What impact do you hope to have in your new role as liaison to the ECR Associate Board?

An Associate Board has great power to bring new people into the fold and build excitement in new spaces. That can look like creating advocacy spaces and having people who will be the word of mouth that organizations and nonprofits need to garner a strong reputation to continue their work. It brings in a new audience of people who can do this, but who may not have yet had the opportunity to do it in an official capacity. Creating a meaningful charge that people can rally around, whether fundraising, events, or volunteering, provides a base to build on. Also, having a diverse coalition that comes from different sectors, backgrounds, and orientations always provides a more valuable experience to ensure that we can spread the word and engage a wider audience than we may have historically been able to.

Personally, I love to build things. A lot of important issues are messy and complex, and being able to say, "Let's try something new," is always exciting to me. My approach is always to lead with curiosity and figure out what the needs of an organization really are. How do we meet them? What can we scratch beneath the surface to do something remarkable? The opportunity to create that from the ground up is exciting for me, and getting to meet and collaborate with the ECR Governing Board is also energizing.

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

We know that early childhood is fundamental to setting kids up for long-term success, but it also provides the foundations for kindergarten and minimizing the opportunity gap. Early childhood goes beyond universal Pre-K; it's also getting into that early intervention space. Those wraparound services are so important to set up kids for success.

On the disability side of things, the world is changing. The economy is changing. What jobs look like

in the economy has changed. With that comes a lot of opportunities, particularly for individuals with disabilities who have previously been largely disenfranchised from the workplace. It's an exciting development.

What brought you to education work in your professional life?

I've spent my career in education and working in the educational equity space. One component of that space is to ensure every child has the opportunity to reach their full potential. My journey began in high school when I worked with a free summer camp for students who live under the poverty line in Philadelphia. That inspired me to work in the education space and I studied public policy and sociology at the University of Chicago with urban education, research, and policy at the center. Once I explored that from an academic perspective, I was excited to take what I had learned and get to know it better on the ground in Boston as a Teach For America Corps member. I loved seeing the incredible things that my students were capable of and understanding the way systems of inequity intersect in the classroom space.

After teaching, I wanted to return to the macro-level impact I had studied in college. I joined Teach For America's staff, where I worked on recruitment and education innovation work. Now, I do education consulting with LiberatED Way and think about redesigning schools and centering them around students' and communities' needs.

What have you been reading recently that you would recommend?

I've been super excited about the book, "How a City Learned to Improve Its Schools," which is all about Chicago and how it became one of the fastest-growing districts despite the turbulence in its central office. It's such an interesting puzzle. Nothing would have suggested that Chicago should have been successful at all, yet it outpaced many similar districts in academic growth. The book digs into the reasons why and why not for its success. I recommend everyone read it.