

Q&A with Easterseals Serving Chicagoland and Greater Rockford's Board Member, Gary Kohn

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Board Member Spotlight



Architect Gary Kohn first connected with Easterseals in 2003 while designing the Easterseals Academy in Chicago. What began as a professional project grew into a lasting commitment—Gary has now served nearly 10 years on the ECR Board of Directors.



When Gary Kohn joined the Chicago architecture and design firm Solomon Cordwell Buenz (SCB) in 2003, he was unfamiliar with Easterseals' work to support children and individuals with disabilities or, as a Nebraska native, the local nonprofit landscape in general. Twenty-two years and a storied career later, Gary's legacy is evident every day at the Easterseals Academy therapeutic day school in Chicago he and his colleagues at SCB designed.

Through the design process, Gary learned a lot about what establishing safe, nurturing learning environments for children with intellectual and developmental disabilities involves, and grew attached to Easterseals Serving Chicagoland and Greater Rockford (ECR) in ways he didn't expect. This coming year will mark Gary's tenth anniversary as an ECR Board Member, and he sat down with us to reflect on his journey. He also shared his hopes for ECR's future as we prepare to celebrate our 90th year supporting local children and families of all abilities.

ECR: Tell us about your time at SCB and initial work with ECR.

Gary Kohn: I dedicated 20 years of my career to SCB. One of the most memorable projects was in 2003 when SCB was tasked with designing a school for Easterseals Serving Chicagoland and Greater Rockford. I managed the project and worked closely with the CEO and former COO (now fellow Board member), Barbara Zawacki. When I started the project, I didn't know anything about autism so I did some reading and research on it. We had to learn about the lighting and sensory needs of ECR's students, for example. It was a very deliberate and very collaborative process.

ECR: How did you become involved with Easterseals after the project?

Gary Kohn: Near the project's completion, ECR's development lead at the time came by the SCB office and asked if someone may want to join the Board. SCB encouraged people to be involved in something outside of the office so I thought it would be a good opportunity and said, 'Well, what about me?' After that, my firm [SCB] continued to work on various projects for Easterseals, including the construction of a gymnasium. I've stuck with it because I think the mission is great and have also enjoyed the people!

ECR: Can you share a proud moment from your time with Easterseals?

Gary Kohn: I have to give a lot of credit to Sara Ray Hallman, ECR's current President & CEO. When she came on board, there was a major claim from a contractor and the finance aspect of things was looking pretty dire. Sara did a great job of getting to a resolution and I was able to help with that. She transformed a potentially disastrous financial situation into a manageable one and that was a real turning point for the organization.

ECR: What do you think you would tell someone who knows nothing about Easterseals Serving Chicagoland and Greater Rockford—about who we are and what we do?

Gary Kohn: I would probably talk about the educational aspect of the Easterseals Academy and encourage them to go visit the school to see how difficult and challenging it is and what the needs are. I would also say read the news and listen to all that's going on with the increase in prevalence of autism. The need is increasing, and I think there's still a lot of education to be done in society about the fact that kids with autism have special abilities. How to harness that too is a big question and opportunity.

ECR: What are your hopes for the future of ECR as it approaches its 90th anniversary?

Gary Kohn: It would be great to see the footprint expand, if possible. I also hope for the development of new funding mechanisms to support ECR's mission. As long as I've been on the Board, there's been this dilemma with funding and, politically, it's a really tough one to crack now. It would be great if,

at the state level, there were some other means to support the organization so it could better plan and budget and really leverage what it has.

“I thoroughly enjoyed working with Gary and his team from SCB during and after the building of both the school and gym,” ECR Board member and former Chief Operating Officer, Barbara Zawacki shared. “Gary was very sensitive to the needs of our students and wanted to ensure the building met the educational, sensory, and emotional needs of the kids. He took time to listen to our teachers and clinicians about how classrooms and therapy rooms should be constructed. Gary is a very caring and giving individual, [and] also an amazing member of the ECR Board of Directors.”

ECR’s President and CEO, Sara Ray Hallman, seconds that, adding, “Gary Kohn and Susan Barry have been among our most generous supporters. We cannot thank them enough for their incredible, long-lasting impact on our students, families, and staff.”

Gary, thank you for your nearly decade of service to ECR. We are deeply grateful for your ongoing partnership and support!