

BUSINESS



BUSINESS LEADERS SUNDAY CONVERSATION

‘There’s no mastering it, so you’re just learning all the time’

Stacey Hengsterman had to learn to be the face of Special Olympics after 18 years working behind the scenes at SUNY.

Marie Morelli mmorelli@syracuse.com

As chief of staff to the chancellor of the State University of New York, Stacey Hengsterman was accustomed to being “the person behind the person,” putting out fires across 64 college campuses.

It was an adjustment when, after 18 years at SUNY, Hengsterman became president and CEO of Special Olympics New York. The statewide nonprofit organization creates opportunities for people with intellectual disabilities to compete in sports.

“The biggest thing I had to learn was to be the principal,” she says. “What I needed to do was set the vision and help the team get to the vision.”

Seven years into the job, Hengsterman’s strategic vision is to more than double participation in Special Olympics from 31,000 in 2021 to 71,000. Currently 48,000 athletes participate. Revenue has grown from \$8 million to \$13.5 million during her tenure. The organization has 65 employees in seven offices around the state. But it’s the 14,000 volunteers — 7,000 of them coaches — who make it go.

Special Olympics will stage its statewide summer games June 20-21 in Ithaca. The games are just the “cherry on top” for athletes like Hengsterman’s powerlifting son, Alex, 21, who has Down syndrome.

“What changes Alex Hengsterman’s life is that he goes to practice three times a week at the local gym with his team,” she says. “He practices for an hour. That is what is making the change in fighting that social isolation, that loneliness, that boredom.”

Special Olympics also engages schools to form unified sports teams, where athletes with intellectual disabilities are paired with peers.

Hengsterman, 53, is a SUNY Cortland distinguished alumna. In 2021, she was named to City & State’s Upstate Power 100 list and received its “Above & Beyond” award in 2021. She and her husband, Rick, have three children and live in Clifton Park.

Were you in leadership roles growing up in Rochester?

Not roles specifically, but I would say I had leadership expectations growing up. My father, Pete Bohne, would love that. “Be a leader, not a follower” was constant.

My mother (the late Sally Bohne) went back to work when I was in high school at Hillside Children’s Center as a volunteer manager part time and ended up being instrumental in all the things they did.

My father had leadership jobs in business. He certainly always instilled that work owes you nothing. You owe them



Stacey Hengsterman gestures while speaking at the 2023 Special Olympics state winter games opening ceremony in Syracuse. *Special Olympics New York*



NEXT WEEK

Natalie Stetson, executive director of the Erie Canal Museum in downtown Syracuse.

“Sunday Conversation” features Q&A interviews about leadership, success and innovation. The conversations are condensed and edited. Extended versions run at syracuse.com.

something.

How does your family’s experience figure into your work?

It’s probably one of the biggest blessings of my life.

I have three children. Alex is our middle son. He has Down syndrome. He’s 21 now. He was 15 or so when I started. He was not a Special Olympics athlete.

Getting my son involved in Special Olympics showed me that it’s not that easy to get involved, and it’s not an access problem, per se. ... You’re [not necessarily] going to join the local swim team or track and field team. It matters the ages of the other athletes. It matters the activity. It matters the skill levels that they have. It’s match-making. It takes time. It’s up to us as a staff to help find that match or to create something new if we don’t have it.

Alex ended up joining the powerlifting team. He looked up to those other athletes doing it. ... The impact that it has made on our family is like night and day. ... the confidence that it’s given him, the joy that he has from being in Special Olympics, the network of families.

There’s so much joy in having a son like Alex, but ... It’s lonely sometimes. You don’t get invited to all the dinner parties. You’ve

got a 21-year-old that’s going to be hanging with you a lot of places. So having that network of families for us, having things for him to do (made me realize) the impact (Special Olympics) could make.

How does that drive your leadership?

I need to make sure every mom and dad knows what Special Olympics does. Then I have to help them find a place so they can have it, too. If you’re in Special Olympics, I want to make sure they have all the opportunities that Alex has. I know when they get there, it’s going to work for them, too.

You’re highly dependent on volunteers. How do you motivate them?

It’s the way our athletes are committed to the sport, committed to the program, committed to each other, the teamwork that is shown.

My job is to get (volunteers) to the door to see the opportunity and try to make it as easy as possible. We have 96%, 97% return volunteer rate. Retention of volunteers is the easiest job in the world. Recruiting, because people are busy, is difficult.

Why should people volunteer?

They should volunteer if they’re looking for something additional in their lives.

There are so many different volunteer opportunities. You don’t have to be a coach.

What’s the best piece of advice that a parent, a mentor or boss ever gave you?

The Golden Rule: Treat others the way you want to be treated. That goes professionally, even in very difficult situations, staffing situations, human resources, having to be the boss and not able to be as candid or as open. You’re always protected, and the organization is always protected, if you stick with process.

If you could go back in time and give your younger self some advice, what would it be?

My father instilled “no regrets” and I don’t have any regrets. The advice to the younger person is: If you are a good person, you treat others the way you want to be treated, you work hard — if that’s all in place, then it’s going to work out for you.

What advice would you give for effective leadership, especially for somebody who’s new to it?

Leadership is ever evolving. I still use a job coach. There’s no mastering of it, so you’re just learning all the time.

It is the systems approach. Understanding the system will make you a better leader.

There’s no right or wrong when you’re working with a group of people and you’re working with an organization. I look for everyone to be heard, understanding all of the perspectives from all the different departments.

... My mentor, (former SUNY Chancellor) Nancy Zimpher, used to say she didn’t like one-on-one meetings. As a leader, what you want is everybody at the table and you’re (hearing) everyone’s perspective. Hearing everybody is the most important (part) of leadership.

College students are often counseled to major in “something useful.” You were an English major at SUNY Cortland. How did that work out?

I was an English major, no minor, at a school that focuses on teachers, and I didn’t want to be a teacher. So how was that going to work out for me? It did not. There was no grand plan.

I like to read. So, English sounded good. I didn’t have a strong, clear vision for what I wanted to be when I grew up.

What you need to get out of college is: You need to be a good person. You need to be able to write. Being able to write is the best skill you could bring to any job.

You get experience in every book that you read. You’re learning something about a different place, about a different culture, about a different personality.

You want to get out of college with a degree and then just get your hustle going. Pick up every assignment and do every extra thing. And if you’re going to work (hard), you’re going to be good at it.

People in motion



Wimmer



Kain



Ierardi

Chace Wimmer joins Prudent Engineering LLP as a computer-aided design technician/instrument operator in its land survey department. Based at Prudent headquarters in East Syracuse, he has more than three years of experience in a wide range of surveying services. He is also an FAA-certified remote pilot. He earned an associate’s degree in land surveying technology from the Ranger School at the SUNY College of Environmental Science & Forestry and an associate’s in applied sciences from SUNY Morrisville.

S.E.E.D. Planning Group has promoted one staff member and added a new member.

Dan Kain, a senior wealth manager, was promoted to manager of financial planning education. He joined the firm in 2021 and became a member of its leadership team earlier this year.

Alex Ierardi joins the firm’s financial planning team as a financial planner. Ierardi

earned a bachelor’s degree in finance from SUNY Geneseo. He is based in the firm’s Syracuse office.

Adam Brown was named president of Pinnacle Insurance Associates, Pinnacle Holding Co. LLC’s newly established insurance division. Brown has more than 25 years of experience in commercial insurance and risk management. He began his insurance career while in college as an intern in the risk management department of a leading Northeast regional independent insurance broker.

Stephanie Salanger joins the leadership team Community Financial System Inc. as director of communications. Salanger previously worked for Syracuse University’s D’Aniello Institute for Veterans & Military Families and the Office of Veterans & Military Affairs as director of communications. She also was director of corporate social

responsibility at Time Warner Cable. Salanger earned a bachelor’s degree in mass communication and media studies from SUNY Geneseo.

Jason Astafan joins Caring Family Health, a family care provider. Astafan is a family nurse practitioner who earned a master’s degree in nursing with a focus in family nurse practitioner from SUNY Polytechnic Institute and has more than 15 years of experience as a registered nurse in emergency medicine, intensive care, and orthopedics at multiple local hospitals. He most recently worked at Drakos Urgent Care in Cicero. *Compiled from news releases*

SEND YOUR NEWS AND PHOTOS

Send your People in Motion news to business@syracuse.com. Then find your news at Syracuse.com/business and share it on Facebook, LinkedIn or other social media. Please include photos as attachments to the email.



Guiding Leaders, Teams, and Organizations to reach their full potential.

100 Clinton Square
126 North Salina Street, Suite 402
Syracuse, NY 13202 • 315-635-6300
www.getemergent.com



Discover our Leadership Development Programs