



OVERCOMING BARRIERS

The new leader at Easterseals Wisconsin brings a unique perspective on breaking through.

BY JAN WILSON AND PHOTOGRAPH BY GUELLER'S PHOTOGRAPHY

Paul Leverenz, 54, was recently named successor to longtime Easterseals Wisconsin (ESW) President and CEO Christine Fessler. The moment gave him pause, reflecting on how far he'd come.

School was never easy for Leverenz, but it wasn't for lack of trying. One day, after being handed the results of yet another underwhelming college essay exam, his instructor at UW–Oshkosh finally called him over. “Paul, you're a bright, talented guy with a ton of information in here, but what's wrong? You can't write!”

He remembers standardized tests in the 8th grade indicating his reading level to be advanced well beyond his years but his ability to spell equivalent to that of a first grader; and in high school, he ranked 187 out of 220 kids.

“Back then, nobody could explain that,” he says. “They just kept telling me to try harder.”

The educator suggested he visit the campus learning center where Dr. Robert Nash was studying dyslexia and other language-based learning disorders.

After several visits, Leverenz not only had a diagnosis, but a game plan for fighting back. From that point

forward, he was a regular on the dean's list and went on to earn a master's in vocational rehabilitation counseling from Minnesota State University–Mankato.

The experience, he says, gave him a unique perspective on both seen and unseen barriers faced every day by people with disabilities. “That's why this opportunity with Easterseals, and the ability to lead an organization that impacts other people's lives, is pretty humbling.”

“Leadership is leadership whether in times of crisis or not ...”

— Paul Leverenz, Easterseals Wisconsin

How did you get involved with ESW?

I grew up on our family's seven-generation dairy farm in New Holstein that unfortunately ended with the farm crisis in the 1980s. I first started as a service provider when there were about 70,000 farms across the state. I launched the FARM program in 1992 to help farmers with disabilities farm. The program is now statewide.

How many disabled farmers does the program serve?

There are roughly half as many farms now, but the permanent disability rate has stayed consistent at 18% to 19%, so we serve about 7,200 farmers annually now with a variety of disabilities — amputations from accidents, quadriplegics, farmer's lung from silo gas. We help farmers put the pieces together on the disability end so they can produce the product, grow, haul, and get connected to resources.

Has COVID-19 affected the organization?

Honestly, I didn't think it would early on, but the isolation of being alone during a period of great uncertainty, especially when the markets were fluctuating, has increased referrals. Then, our summer camp in the Dells that so many families and team members rely on was canceled, which is truly tragic. There's never a good time for a pandemic, of course, but this was really bad timing.

As ESW's new leader, what goals do you have?

Chris left this organization in a very sound financial position, so now it's on me not to mess that up, frankly, and to motivate, encourage, support, and address any concerns. Leadership is leadership whether in times of crisis or not, and I look forward to working with our board directly to implement their vision and meeting some of our supporters, the donors, and volunteers, as well.

What do you do for fun?

I have a sawmill and enjoy woodworking. We still own a piece of land that's been in our family for 150 years. More than half is wooded, so I love to walk the woods, remove invasive plants, and identify young seedlings so I know what I'll be planting for years into the future. **BB**