



Michael Lawrence — Creating Empathy for the Community

By Jenna Caputo | Photos by Angela Mia Photography & Contributed by Michael Lawrence

Michael Lawrence wants to make a difference. “I approach every day with the intention of leaving others in a better place than they were the day before,” he says.

Born in Connecticut, Michael’s family moved to Clifton Park in 1981 when his Dad received a job transfer at Garden Way/Troy Bilt. Michael’s wife, Carly, was born in Syracuse and moved with her family to the area in 1995 when her mom was transferred with Nationwide. They both attended Shenendehowa but didn’t meet until they worked together in the dining room at Coburg Village in 2000. They were active in school in both sports and music and stayed in the region for college. Carly attended Siena. Michael attended UAlbany for Communications and is currently working on his MBA at Clarkson.

After working several roles in healthcare, Michael is now the Senior Leader of Talent Development and Engagement at MVP Health Care, responsible for organizational learning, performance management and employee engagement and inclusion. “I have always had a passion for transformation, change and human performance,” says Michael. “I derive joy and energy out of cultivating relationships and driving successful outcomes.”

Through the years, he participated in several learning initiatives including the Leadership Tech Valley as well as other professional certifications. He considers himself very lucky to find a professional home that has a mission that resonates with him. “MVP is like family. My colleagues are among the most passionate, caring and talented people I have encountered. We all share a common interest in leaving our community a better place,” he says.

In addition to his healthcare work, Michael has also been on the Board of Directors for the Big Brothers Big Sisters organization since 2016. Currently the Vice President of the Board and Chair for the Board Development Committee, Michael is proud of the effective work they do for the community. “The role of mentoring and meaningful connections are immeasurable. There are so many young people in our communities who could benefit from having a big brother or big sister, just to be with. It does not take much time or energy, and the return on that investment will pay you back for a lifetime,” he says.



As VP, his primary responsibility is fundraising, board recruitment and agency support. But as a volunteer, it's to help the agency sustain and make more matches. The community can assist in this important endeavor by volunteering their help behind the scenes or as a "big." Anyone interested in becoming a "big" is expected to be present and spend time with their "little." Normally, this could mean anything from doing an activity together, helping with homework or just being there in whatever support the child needs. Michael has witnessed many stories of the children in the program who grow up as very successful adults, many of whom say their participation in the program was the life-altering trajectory that became the main difference in their lives to propel them forward. It's even more rewarding when Michael also hears the stories from the "bigs" about how much they too received from their match relationship.

In 2020, Michael was recognized for all of his work throughout the community with the Albany Business Review's 40 Under 40 Award. His community work is very important to him. "We are advocates for equality and put our energy and support behind initiatives and individuals who further those opportunities," he says.

Outside of work, Michael is also a musician, having played guitar for about 25 years. After his mom taught him a few chords for some Peter, Paul & Mary songs, he began writing songs himself and singing in his bedroom throughout high school and college. It was a hobby that grew into a passion, and he began performing live in 2005. He performs solo and also with his two bands—Acoustic Inc and Grux, a Dave Matthews (DMB) tribute band that has performed all over the Capital Region. He has been following the DMB since 1998, attending over 80 of their concerts and has met a few of the band members, including Dave Matthews himself. DMB's crew and vocal coach have even attended some of Grux's cover shows in Saratoga.

Because of the pandemic, he is not currently performing publicly, but has done a handful of live stream shows from his house and continues to write, record and tinker with songs while waiting until it is safe to perform again. "I miss being with my friends and connecting with an audience," he says. "There is nothing like the feeling of sharing a creative moment with other humans!"

In the meantime, he strives to stay physically active, incorporating an activity each day like jogging, circuit training or weights. He is also an advocate for destigmatizing mental wellbeing. He himself has struggled with anxiety from a very young age, at first not knowing what it was or how to articulate what he felt. During his teens, and early 20s, he began to understand what he was experiencing. Panic attacks, depression, and generalized anxiety became a regular part of his life, and one of the big reasons he engrossed himself in his music as an outlet.

"I remember driving on I-87 one day in early 2002 headed to class, and I was in tears. I was so frustrated, scared and tired. I was sick of feeling out of control. DMB's song, 'Pig,' came on and it literally save me. The lyrics— *'Don't beat your head, dry your eyes,*

I've learned that people will forget what you said, people will forget what you did, but people will never forget how you made them feel.

~Maya Angelou



let the love in there, there's bad times but that's ok. Just look for love in it—' hit home. Since then, I have been fortunate to work with a great therapist and have a wonderful support network of friends and family. I have learned to accept and manage my anxiety. It can be a challenge, but it also allows me to be disciplined, introspective and empathetic. It's ok. It's nothing to be ashamed of. It has also helped me to see how we all are fighting our own invisible battles. We need to remove the stigmatization of mental health."

Michael and Carly's family now includes Emma (11), Avery (9) and Olivia (7). Carly has been a successful Account Manager at Amsure for 14 years now. The girls are involved in gymnastics, musical theater, Girl Scouts, student council and spend much time swimming in the summer. As a family, they all love to be outside and to support the creative economy of the Capital Region. "There are so many great theaters, restaurants, bars, parks and cafes. It is truly a remarkable area once you get out of your comfort zone," says Michael.

Michael and Carly also delight in cooking together when they have the time. Taco Tuesday and their Sunday brunches with pancakes, French toast, eggs and more are family favorites! Coming from an Italian family, Carly is also a master at traditional dishes like homemade meatballs and sauce, eggplant and chicken cutlet. But just like every other household, when time is short, peanut butter, grilled cheese or whatever is around will do just fine. "We have an amazing family. We argue, bicker and drive each other nuts like anyone else. We are normal people. But, ultimately, we love and support each other," says Michael. "All three of my girls were born between 10/23 and 12/7. So in a matter of six weeks, we have birthday, Halloween, birthday, Thanksgiving, birthday and then Christmas/New Years!"

Michael and Carly's eyes were opened to a very different world when their daughter was diagnosed with Autism Spectrum Disorder (ASD). They could tell from an early age that she was processing things and developing in a unique way. It took a few years of consultation before the official diagnosis. "She sees and feels things in her own way, which has provided us with an opportunity to learn and grow," says Michael. "The autism spectrum is just that—a spectrum. People with ASD are not all the same. She is extremely affectionate, very animated, intelligent and creative. We want her to be her original and authentic self. What we have learned is that she does not need to change or try to be something else. She is perfectly unique, and we would not want her to be anyone else."

Before COVID, their family also loved to travel, visiting Cape Cod every summer, Disney and spontaneous road trips as well as a few jaunts to Cancun. In 2003, Michael also had the opportunity to climb to the top of the Mayan pyramids in Chichen Itza, Mexico. "Just being present on such a historical land was difficult to describe," he says. They are looking forward to traveling again once things become safer.



The pandemic has obviously brought with it many unique challenges, but it has also brought to light many truths for Michael's family and a renewed passion for connecting with others and working to create an inclusive and empathetic world. As he reflects on the past year and what he wishes for the upcoming year, Michael hopes our nation can have a renewed emphasis on truth and science. "We live in an era where influence is revered as important as expertise. I believe that is a slippery slope," he says. "And one we need to be mindful of. So much disinformation exists these days, and I hope that we develop intentional efforts to improve critical thinking skills. I would also wish for a future where inclusivity is not a debatable topic."



In terms of new year thoughts closer to home, Michael wants to continue reaching out to the community and connecting with his family. "These are unique and challenging times for so many. I have had the great fortune to have good health, meaningful work and a network of great friends and family. I recognize that not everyone possesses the same types of resources. I am focused in 2021 on my job, my board/community work, continuing my MBA and my music. In any small way I can, I want to help influence others to be more empathetic. You do not have to agree with someone to be empathetic. I hope that through my various work efforts I can inspire others to focus on improving how we treat each other (including ourselves). Mostly, I want to spend time with my family."

He'd like to remind people how important it is to remember that we share the world and have a responsibility in our actions and within our community. As Fred Rogers said, "We live in a world in which we need to share responsibility. It's easy to say, 'It's not my community, not my world, not my problem.' Then there are those who see the need and respond. I consider those people my heroes."

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