



Christopher Graber

Life Is About the Choices You Make

By Jenna Caputo | Photos by Angela Mia Photography & Contributed by Christopher Graber

For some people, deciding what to do “when they grow up” can be an agonizing choice. For others, like Christopher Graber, life hands you a situation that becomes a defining moment.

During college, Christopher was diagnosed with a severe case of ulcerative colitis, an inflammatory disease affecting the innermost lining of the large intestine. Needing major surgery at 21 years old to remove his large intestine, he then required rehabilitation and short-term home care. The sudden lifestyle change resulted in significant weight loss, lack of mobility and the need for personal care, which was understandably not an easy thing to handle.

“The entire experience provided an unusual lens into the reality of what it’s like to have a total stranger come into your home to help you care for yourself and provide very personal daily care,” says Christopher. “Ultimately, my health improved, but the experience left a permanent impression with me and motivated me to seek a career in serving others that require home care.” His life had found a new purpose.

Originally from Troy, NY, Christopher lived with his parents, Hugh and Barbara Graber, and his three older siblings, Brenda, Brian and David. Christopher is extremely close with his family who all work in health and human services. His mother is a retired secretary to the executive principal at Troy High School; his father is a retired controller; his sister is a special education preschool teacher at A Child’s Place, part of Unity House; his brother, Brian, is a senior caseworker at Rensselaer County

Department of Social Services, Adult Protective Unit; and his brother, David, is a Research Scientist at Dartmouth College, specializing in therapeutics for neurodegenerative diseases with a focus on ALS and Alzheimer’s disease.

When Christopher was younger, he enjoyed collecting and trading sports cards with his friends, as well as fishing and playing baseball. As a pitcher, he was a top player in the area and was scouted by colleges until his diagnosis changed his trajectory. Choosing to go to Siena College for a Finance degree, he worked on the side as a manager at The Snowman in Troy, a historic walk-up, homemade ice cream stand founded in the early 1950s. He also interned at Kinney and Associates, a government and professional services company that provides program management, consulting and technology services to both local and federal governments.

After graduating, Christopher’s first professional role was as the bookkeeper at Consumer Directed Choices, Inc. (CDChoices), a nonprofit corporation that empowers seniors and people with disabilities who need medical and personal care services to enjoy greater flexibility and freedom of choice in obtaining those services through the Medicaid program, Consumer Directed Personal Assistance (CDPA). Christopher was promoted to Accountant, then Chief Financial Officer in 2011, before ultimately becoming the Chief Executive Officer in November 2020.



“I enjoy waking up each day knowing I have a purpose, helping others in our community,” says Christopher. “People with disabilities have a history of fighting for their right to make independent choices. CDChoices exists to ensure everyone has a choice to self-hire their own home care workers. Choice is critical to the emotional and physical well-being of the people we serve. I am proud to help the company build relationships in the community and fulfill our mission of empowering independence to promote self-determination, integrity and individual dignity. Independence is vital to the happiness and well-being of disabled individuals, increasing their self-worth, confidence, productivity and economic security. With increased Consumer satisfaction and a quality workforce comes positive impacts to health, care and costs.”

Recognized as “Nonprofit of the Year” by the Capital Region Chamber in 2019, CDChoices has allowed eligible individuals to directly choose their medical and personal care while CDChoices provides the payroll and program administration infrastructure.

Christopher loves being a part of empowering “Consumers” with maximum control and giving them the independence to create higher levels of confidence and security. But, he says the frustrating part of his job is witnessing the inequity in health care. Due to New York State limitations on reimbursement, home care workers (“Personal Assistants” or PAs) are not being paid the wages they deserve as essential workers. “Being a caregiver is a difficult job and takes great responsibility. It takes patience, kindness and sacrifice. It’s physically demanding and can be emotionally draining. It’s also rewarding,” says Christopher.

Without CDPA contributing to shrinking nursing home populations, the tragedy that has played out over the last year and continues today would have been even worse. But despite the increased need for long-term care, there has been over \$200

million in state budget cuts to CDPA over the last two years, including a \$45 million cut in PA wages at the height of the outbreak in April. The proposed NYS 2021-22 Executive Budget further jeopardizes the pay for home care workers.

“These cuts have threatened the ability of this essential program to be effective at a time when it’s most needed,” says Christopher. “Cuts to wages and benefits are significant obstacles to both recruitment and retention of home care workers. I’m reminded of the large highway signs communicating ‘Stay Home, Stop the Spread’ and ‘Avoid Travel Where Possible.’ CDPA PAs and other home care workers could not stay at home nor avoid travel. Home care workers were on the front lines taking care of seniors and people with disabilities who are underserved, vulnerable and cannot live independently without the care of their workers. Without home care workers, Consumers wouldn’t be able to get out of bed, have a meal prepared, take a bath and many other critical activities of daily living. Being able to choose where to live and how to receive needed supports and by whom should be recognized as a basic human right,” says Christopher.

Having people recruit and hire their own workers fosters a narrowing of the language and culture gaps that have plagued the health care system and has also allowed friends or family to become paid caregivers, creating new options for families.





Informal care often means sacrificing a paycheck. “If the coronavirus taught us anything, it’s that programs like CDPA keep vulnerable, underserved populations healthier and safer. The rapid spread of COVID-19 in nursing homes and institutional settings caused fear and anxiety for many of our Consumers and is a reminder of the impact that community-based programs like CDPA have had when it comes to keeping seniors and people with disabilities in their own homes. Modernizing federal and state Medicaid rules is a must,” says Christopher.

Christopher is determined to do his best as a leader at CDChoices to provide the highest-quality care possible for the families in our community. In January, he led a rebranding initiative as well as a geographical service area expansion initiative extending CDChoices’ footprint from 19 counties in the Capital Region to all counties in NYS, excluding the NYC boroughs, Nassau, Suffolk and Westchester counties. Recently, Christopher spearheaded a collaborative strategic initiative with a nonprofit organization based in Glens Falls, which increased CDChoices’ size in membership while extending more value-added offerings for Consumers and their PAs who transitioned to CDChoices. Christopher himself has been nominated by his peers for Albany Business Review’s 2018 CFO of the Year Achievers Award and is being nominated this year for the Albany Business Review’s 40 Under 40 Award. The winners will be announced this month.

In addition to his work, Christopher is a member of the Crohn’s and Colitis Foundation and volunteers at his church. He is striving for a better work-life balance and uses inspiration from his various mentors to build a loving and happy life. He once received a class handout during college that now hangs framed in his office. It is a list of 12 values he strives to live by each day:

1. Express gratitude.
2. Humility should be your watchword.
3. Empathize by putting yourself into others’ shoes.
4. Learn to apologize.
5. Work is worship—work more than you are paid for.
6. Develop a positive and optimistic attitude.
7. Good ideas and knowledge can be truly powerful.
8. Learn to compromise, to create a win-win situation.
9. Choose good mentors in your life.
10. Strengthen the three things that are an intrinsic part of your life. These are character, education and health.
11. Treat money with respect—give some to charity.
12. Finally, appreciate the power of prayer. Seek God’s grace in everything you do.

Christopher also finds strength in the words his father often shares with him— “As your father, I am always there for you. Remember always, God loves you, and I do too. Seek His grace in everything you do.”

The Navy SEAL Code of never quitting, always getting back up and never being without the strength to fight through any situation continues to be a source of motivation for Christopher, as well as a childhood gift from his mother—*Dave Dravecky, Comeback*, a book about the personal and professional struggles and triumphs of the San Francisco Giants pitching star.

As important as family and staying grounded is to Christopher, so too is the incredible bond he shares with his wife Naomi. The two met at CDChoices where she currently works as the Office Operations Manager. Before that, she worked as a PA for a Consumer enrolled in CDPA. The two were married in June 2017 and decided to move to Clifton Park the following year, wanting a community to raise a family that would foster a sense of security and belonging. While they adore their two Westies, Mia and Winter, they are truly excited to be expecting their first child this June.



Christopher and Naomi both love to travel. New York City holds a special place in their hearts, as they go every year to see the Rockefeller tree, but it is also where they were engaged. Hawaii has been their favorite trip so far, although their honeymoon in Maui became quite memorable when Christopher lost his wedding ring in the ocean on the first day. Luckily, they found a scuba diver with a metal detector and he managed to find it. They have also been to Turks and Caicos. The two believe traveling is important, and they're looking forward to once again exploring as a new family once the pandemic is over.

“What traveling and vacation has taught me is that it's not where you go, it's who you travel with that makes trips more meaningful and experiences more enriched,” says Christopher. “Embedding memories, especially strengthening relationships on vacation, influence and enhance brain development and open the doors to new culture and experiences. Vacations also increase social awareness and perhaps develop a sense of empathy or learning to value humanity. It can also teach our children to be more adaptive.”

Additionally, Christopher and Naomi enjoy finding new restaurants. Christopher is always open to trying new things, even when Naomi introduced him to sushi. As a Japanese woman, sushi had always been a part of her life, but at first, Christopher couldn't stomach it. Now he eats sushi at least once a week. They are looking forward to exploring more restaurants after the pandemic.

In the meantime, Christopher isn't the type of guy to just sit around. He will forever be working to better himself and his community, striving for good choices to reach his life goals.



“Life is made up of an infinite amount of choices, and every choice you make brands you,” he says. “Your life changes the moment you make a new, congruent and steadfast decision. The key to accepting responsibility to your life is to accept the fact that your choices, every one of them, are leading you inevitably to either success or failure, however you define those terms. Rather than procrastinate in fear of making the wrong decision, weigh your options and act on the best one—revel in the chance to create the life you want to live. Success is not just handed to you—you must work hard for it and you must never dishonor what you've achieved.”

