

# CLIFTON PARK

SEPTEMBER 2023

## Neighbors



*Stacey Hengsterman*

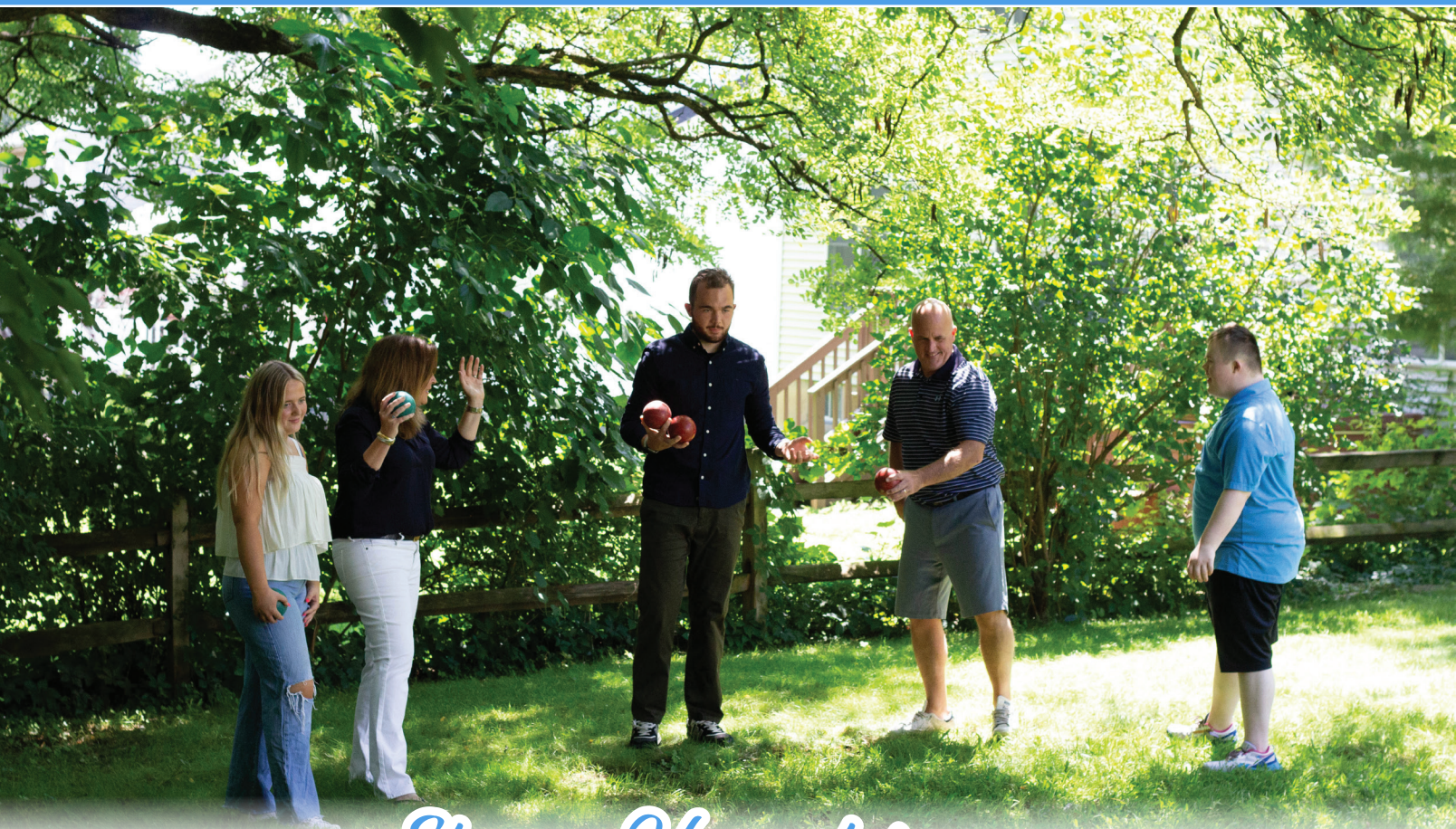
Working For a More  
Inclusive World



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PHOTO BY BROOKLYNNE BEEBE PHOTOGRAPHY





## Stacey Hengsterman

### Working For a More Inclusive World

By Jenna Caputo | Photos by Brooklynne Beebe Photography & Contributed by The Hengsterman Family

Stacey Hengsterman is passionate about inclusion, and she has taken that passion to her career in her current role as President and Chief Executive Officer of Special Olympics New York—one of the largest Special Olympics programs in the country and world. Born in Fairfax, Virginia, Stacey and her family moved around a lot in her early years before settling in Pittsford, NY during middle school. As one of four kids, she had a great family life. "I enjoyed a pretty stereotypical 1970s/'80s childhood of traveling to vacations in a station wagon, hanging out in the neighborhood playing endless games of Capture the Flag and Manhunt, family dinners at six, and lots of good TV shows," she recalls.

She went to college at SUNY Cortland where she met her future husband, Rick, as a freshman moving into the dorm where he was starting his sophomore year. After graduation, Stacey moved to Albany for work and Rick came back to the area as well. He had grown up in West Sand Lake and gone to high school at LaSalle Institute. His first job out of school was teaching social studies at Hoosic Valley, then he eventually got a position teaching history at Ballston Spa. Once they married, Stacey and Rick moved to Clifton Park to be halfway between their two jobs. They have now been here for 28 years. Since then, they have expanded their family with three children and two animals: Jackson (22)

is a recent graduate of Binghamton University and working as a public affairs associate for SKDK in Albany; Alex (19) just graduated from Shen, but since he has Down syndrome, he will be staying on with the school system until he is 21, enrolling in their transition program this fall; and Lauren (16) is a junior at Shen this year and works at Arts and Glass outside of school. Boure (Boo-Ray), their golden retriever, and Luna, their cat, round out their family.

Stacey originally spent 20 years as a top advisor to the chancellor, Board of Trustees, and 64 campus presidents at the State University of New York. In 2018, a work colleague who was on the Board of Directors for Special Olympics New York, told her they were looking for a new president and CEO. Stacey applied immediately and eventually got the position. "It's been the role of a lifetime for me, both personally and professionally. The impact that we have on our athletes and communities is unmatched," she says.

Special Olympics NY serves more than 42,000 athletes comprised of children, youth, and adults with intellectual disabilities and provides year-round sports training and competition in 22 sports while working to improve the athletes' health along the way. They partner with more than 200 schools statewide to offer Unified





Sports, where students with and without intellectual disabilities compete as teammates.

"If you want to see what true acceptance and inclusion looks like, go to a unified game or walk the halls of a Unified Champion School like Shenendehowa High School," says Stacey. "In addition to the inclusive sports teams, students lead events and activities throughout the year that encourage all students to practice and value inclusion. At hundreds of these schools statewide, the program is reducing bullying and teasing, overturning negative stereotypes, and spurring healthy social interactions. Students and coaches playing Unified are changing the world, and Shen has proven to be one of the best of the best."

Special Olympics relies heavily on fundraising to make their athletes' dreams come true because all of their programming is offered free to the participants and their families. They provide opportunities to these families that aren't readily accessible elsewhere, like authentic sports training and competition, leadership development, health screenings in eight critical disciplines, and an inclusive community where they can enjoy friendship, support, and fun. "Special Olympics athletes are more confident, happier, and healthier!" says Stacey.

Stacey has seen the effects of the organization first hand. Although she was aware of Special Olympics before she took



the job, she didn't realize it was an option for Alex. He joined the Special Olympics NY powerlifting team, ABC Spartans, three years ago and played on Shen's Unified Bowling team while in high school. "Special Olympics has changed his life—something he reminds me of several times a week," says Stacey. "The fact that it took until Alex was 15 years old for our family to experience that joy—to know and understand what Special Olympics could do for all of us—is what motivates me to tell our story over and over again, so that moms like me and kids like Alex all across New York know that Special Olympics is here for them."

In addition to her work for the Special Olympics, Stacey is also a member of the Pioneer Bancorp Board of Directors. *City & State*





named her on their 2021 Upstate Power 100 list, and she is one of just 30 recipients to receive the 2020 *City & State Above & Beyond Award*, which recognizes women leaders in New York who have made notable contributions to her society. Under her leadership so far, Special Olympics NY has earned the Platinum Seal Of Transparency from Guidestar.com—its highest rating—and was named "Top Workplace" by the *Albany Times Union*.

When she's not working, Stacey loves to spend time with her family and friends. She has been part of a book club with eight other Clifton Park residents for over a decade, and now that the kids are getting older, their neighborhood has started a monthly supper club where they pick a new restaurant each month to eat at together. Stacey and Rick also coach a Special Olympics Unified bocce team together. Saratoga is an important part of the Capital Region for their family. Whether as a family excursion or a date night, Saratoga always feels like a vacation for them. Stacey also loves to travel outside of the area as well. So far, they have kept their travels to the US, and Stacey's favorite part of traveling is discovering extraordinary hotels and pretty places. Their family loves Cape May and Canandaigua Lake as well as Tybee Island and Savannah.

Stacey works hard every day to make an inclusive community as accessible as possible. "I think of the parents of kids with a disability who haven't been able to cheer their child on as they compete on a school sports team, and of the parents



of kids without a disability whose child rarely comes home from school talking about the new friend they met who has Down syndrome or autism or any other intellectual difference. It's such a missed opportunity for both families," she says. "When you provide students with the opportunity to include, they will choose to include. They will include not only on their unified sports team but also during the school day and—if we're really doing it right—even on weekends. They will learn the value of tolerance, acceptance, patience, and kindness, and they will carry these values with them for life. Special Olympics is proving that in hundreds of schools across the state. We are proving it every day at Shen."

Stacey is proud of the work Special Olympics has accomplished. They are building healthier, more confident athletes, and providing an opportunity for people to make friends they would not have made otherwise. "We give our athletes the opportunity to be the best version of themselves, to discover and unleash the champion within. And in the process, our athletes show the world what inclusion looks like and why it's important."



For more information about Special Olympics NY, please visit [specialolympics-NY.org](https://specialolympics-NY.org).

