

“You Know Where to Find Me”

Mercer DD’s Longtime Employee to Retire At the End of June

During her years at Mercer DD, Chris Schulte has been part of a lot of hellos.

As Mercer DD’s Development Specialist, she’s been greeting families with children ages newborn to three for more than 40 years. Hello, hello, hello, what’s going on with your little one, in your family, what has been troubling you, what can we do to help? And then she sets into helping.

One could argue that Mercer DD has never had a better helper. Certainly no one, not one employee in the organization’s history, has stuck around longer than Chris Schulte. She has prodigious energy and compassion, along with an enormous bag of tricks, stored mostly in her head, to help families with young children as part of the Early Intervention program.

Today, Mercer DD’s EI program has a staff of 12 and helps 200 families each year in partnership with Mercer County’s Help Me Grow program.

But there was a time when Chris WAS the EI program. A Coldwater native, she was hired in 1982 to work with families whose young children were showing signs of developmental delays. She started in a small office, with a short client list and a staff of one.

None of that was her intention.

She’d wanted to be a teacher, but “I was aiming to teach older kids. Then I was looking for jobs, and this one was open. I applied and got it,” she said.

Chris was 22, the youngest of a family of 10, and naïve. She had no way of knowing that her first job out of college would become such a big part of her life.

“They asked me during my interview what I would be doing in five years and I said, ‘I’ll be a stay-at-home mom, raising my kids on the farm.’ I was going to be out the door,” she said. “Well, that never happened.”

What did happen was that Chris discovered she had a heart big enough for her own family (she and her husband, Jerry, have four kids and nine grandkids, whom she adores) and many, many other children and their families in Mercer County. In June, Chris will retire, although it’s tearing her up to think about it. She admits she’s terrible at changing and moving on.

“I tell them, anytime you have problems, you give me a call,” she said. “You know where to find me.”

“You know where to find me” could be Chris’ motto. Families find her either at Mercer DD’s facility on Mud Pike west of Celina, or in their own living rooms when Chris does home visits. She sits with parents, hears their concerns, and observes their child’s progress. If something



After 40 years of working with families, Chris Schulte just knows what might work to help each child thrive.

isn’t working, Chris suggests something else. If they’re trying to do too much, she helps them dial it back. If they are overwhelmed, she offers encouragement.

Many, many parents over the years have been wonderful partners in her work, she said. “It’s great to see families take a few bits of advice, some strategies we offer them, and run with it, and run hard,” she said. “To see their child’s success, that’s the neat part. They thank me, but I tell them, ‘The hour that I’m here with you is not making the change. You’re making the change—you can do it!’ And that makes them more powerful, knowing they can help their kids.”

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Progress Toward Higher Wages for DSPs

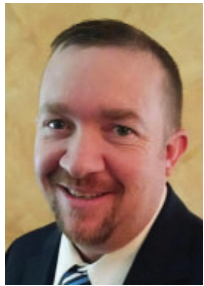
I am very happy to report that there seems to be progress in our fight for higher Medicaid rates, which will ultimately result in higher caregiver (DSP) wages.

Earlier this year, Governor DeWine proposed increasing the state's Medicaid provider reimbursement rates between 10 and 16.5 percent beginning in 2024.

Fortunately for us, that language has remained in place as the Ohio House of Representatives voted 77–19 on the overall budget bill. In fact, the current language raises the average statewide hourly

wage of direct support professionals (DSPs) in Ohio's DD system to \$17/hour on January 1, 2024 and \$18/hour on July 1, 2024.

County Boards have also recently committed an



Mercer DD Superintendent Shawn Thieman

additional \$1/hour to these efforts.

Thanks to the Governor and Ohio House of Representatives, we are two steps closer to our goal of offering competitive wages to those who work to support people with developmental disabilities and their families.

Using baseball as an analogy, we are rounding second base and heading to the Senate. The Ohio Senate began holding hearings on the state budget bill and will hear testimony in the Senate Medicaid Committee from developmental disability advocates on May 4. Coalition members expect to continue their strong advocacy push for the duration of the Senate's budget deliberations.

The message to the Senate remains the same as it was in the House: people with developmental disabilities will continue to struggle to have their basic needs met until the state agrees to pay staff a competitive wage.

DD Budget Advocacy Coalition members continue to collect

stories, testimony and lived experiences from people with developmental disabilities, their family members and DSPs working in Ohio's DD service delivery system. Those who would like to share their stories and get involved in the legislative process are encouraged to visit www.ohioddcrisis.com to learn more and join the cause.

I'd also like to recognize the efforts of two long-time staff members who are retiring this summer. Jessica Heck-Stelzer and Chris Schulte will be greatly missed. Their experience and knowledge of our system will not be easy to replace. We are a better organization because of Jessica and Chris—we wish them well in their retired lives.

Add your voice to our fight for higher wages for DSPs! Visit ohioddcrisis.com to share your stories and get involved!

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She is also quick to give credit to her EI co-workers, whom she loves. Work buddy Lynn Rupert, Mercer DD's Physical Therapist, has been on the job nearly as long as Chris and they work well together, sharing laughs and memories. People often mix them up, Chris said.

The EI team has to work fast, she said. “Birth to three is such an important time, but it's not a long time,” she said. “Sometimes you don't see all the changes you want to see, and that's hard for everybody—and it's really hard for the parents.

“They'll ask, ‘Is he ever going

to talk?’ And I have to say, ‘I don't know.’ How do you answer those questions? I have to be honest, and I say, ‘Let's keep trying so that you know you did your best.’ That way down the road, you can look back and say, ‘We did the best we could.’”

Now, Chris prepares to step away from the job and the families she loves, so that she can devote more of her best efforts to her own family. Her youngest daughter, Janel, is due with twins this summer; Chris wants to be available to help.

Those twins, the second set to be born into Chris' family, are “God's way of giving me a sign” that it's the right time to retire. A way to

jump into the pool of retirement, as she jumps into the family's pond with the older grandkids.

She will always have more than one family. “The neatest thing is when I go to the fair or to a picnic and see parents that I worked with 30 years ago, and we catch up, sometimes giving each other a hug and then asking each other, ‘How are your kids?’ All those people that I've seen. I've been here for so long and I've been all over the county. There were families that I saw more than I saw my own siblings, back in the day. When I get to reconnect with them, that's a neat thing. They will always be a part of me.”

Time to Wrap Up a Rewarding Career

Jessica Heck-Stelzer To Retire After 20 Years with Mercer DD

In “It’s a Wonderful Life,” a movie that has become a Christmas classic, Jimmy Stewart plays George Bailey, who as a young man dreams of being an architect and explorer but instead spends the prime of his life laboring in his family’s penny-ante building and loan.

Jessica Heck-Stelzer always wanted to be a lawyer.

Instead, Jessica found a career in public service, including 20 years at Mercer DD, first as a Service and Support Administrator (SSA) for 18 years, and for the past two years as Quality Services Manager. Jessica reviews all Ohio Individual Service Plans (ISPs) written by SSAs, making sure that they are clear, concise and complete. Her years of work as a paralegal earlier in her career gave her a good background in legal lingo, and she does not mind doing deep dives into regulations to make sure that the ISPs meet requirements.

At the same time, she is a supremely practical person, so she places a high priority on making those important plans easy for all to understand.

Everything that Jessica has learned in her working life, she has formed into tools that make her an effective advocate for the people we serve. On May 31, she will retire.

As a young single mother, Jessica, who grew up in Mendon and still lives there, earned her first associate’s degree at age 25 and immediately went to work as an investigator and a fiscal agent in Allen County’s Child Support Enforcement Agency (CSEA). That agency was responsible for enforcing child support orders as issued

by the courts. In 1999, she applied for and got a similar job in the Mercer County CSEA, where she worked until 2003. Then, she was at her son’s basketball game when a friend told her there were openings at Mercer DD (then Cheryl Ann). “I didn’t even know where Cheryl Ann was,” she said, but she was intrigued by the possibilities.

It fit into her career and educational goals. “I was working full-time (at CSEA) and was a fulltime student at Wright State University Lake Campus, earning an organizational leadership degree—I needed a bachelor’s degree to be an SSA,” she said. “I was still thinking that maybe I’d go to law school.”

Jessica was hired as an SSA in March 2003. She found “a whole new world” at Mercer DD. “It was nice. You’re helping people, and they appreciate your help,” she said.

But in her typical thorough way, she wants people to know that working with people with disabilities is not all roses and rainbows. That would be a disservice to the complexity of their lives.

“It’s rewarding, but it can also be frustrating. The people you are helping can become like your family members—maybe they don’t have family of their own—and you lay awake at night trying to figure out how to help them.

“What’s unique about this field is that you are helping people with every aspect of their lives: their work, education, home, goals, it’s everything.”

There have also been great rewards in serving people. And she met her husband, Mike Stelzer, who was a coworker when she first came to Mercer DD.

Her current job is her dream job, she said. As she reviews the ISPs, “I don’t like gray areas. I want to see things spelled out for everybody. I’m a logical thinker: this



Jessica Heck-Stelzer at her tidy desk, which reveals how her mind works.

step comes before that step.”

As she has tried to see all sides to every story during her career, Jessica looks at all sides of her own retirement, her own story. It’s hard to give up her dream job, but it’s time. Her father, Jim Heck, is 90 years old, and lives with Jessica and Mike in the family home in Mendon, the same home where Jessica grew up. Her son, Adam, has two young daughters, and Jessica wants to spend more time with the girls.

It will be hard to say goodbye to the people of Mercer DD, Jessica knows that. She never got to be a lawyer, but she did work for decades as an advocate for people who needed her. In all those years, she did her best to be fair, thorough, accurate and caring, and to take on the fight for people who needed her.

“I’ve always been for the underdog,” she said.

Yes, it’s been a wonderful life—and we hope this new phase of life will bring more of the same for Jessica.



SPECIAL OLYMPICS SPRING 2023 AT BOWLING GREEN



Pictured at the Special Olympics on a wintery weekend in March are the Sparks traditional cheer team and Stars unified cheer team, above. At left, Coach Scott Brunswick goes over plays with the basketball team before its game at BGSU.

Happy Birthday,



In April 2022, Mercer County Quest was launched!

Quest is for students with disabilities ages 14–22 and those who support them.

It offers information and links to local schools, resources, programs and agencies. Visit mercercountyquest.com to learn more—lots more!.

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