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Easter Seals finds ally in Robbinsville executive

By: [Mercerspace](#)
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Bisesti

Easter Seal's 'Walk with Me' benefit set for April 12 at MetLife Stadium

Robbinsville resident Mike Bisesti did not set out to work with Easter Seals, a nationwide nonprofit that provides services to people with disabilities or special needs. But three years into his tenure with the organization, the 39-year-old has become one of Easter Seals' most tireless supporters as the chairman of its board of directors.

Several years ago, Bisesti, who today is an assistant vice president in the Global Technology and Operations group at MetLife, was already donating money to worthy causes and doing volunteer work, but wanted to do something more.

He learned about Easter Seals through a website that helps connect individuals who want to serve on boards with nonprofit organizations looking for board members. Although at the time he didn't know much about working with people with disabilities, Bisesti was drawn to Easter Seals because he saw it was a group whose work he would be able to become immersed in.

"I wanted to find an organization I could work with and do more than just show up to some of their events or do fundraising," he said. "I really wanted to get involved and learn and really help them."

Easter Seals New Jersey provides a broad range of services to people with all different types of physical and mental disabilities. It has more than 50 facilities throughout the state and each one specializes in providing a different type of service. In addition to residential facilities, it has several programs aimed at helping people take care of themselves.

On April 12, Easter Seals New Jersey is holding an event called Walk With Me at MetLife Stadium. Walk With Me, the organization's big annual fundraiser, is an opportunity to come out and support people disabilities and special needs and "to show them that we want to walk with them," said Bisesti. One important facet of the event is that people with disabilities and special needs who receive services from Easter Seals serve as honorary ambassadors for the day.

In one of its programs, Easter Seals holds workshops where people with disabilities can earn a paycheck by doing a variety of jobs depending on their level of ability. The people who attend the conferences can also help teach each other, build skills and eventually be introduced into the wider workforce. These workshops have a huge impact on the people that attend them, Bisesti said.

"I know one particular person that works there," he said, "that when I go visit [the workshop] or see her at other events, she's always so excited that she can earn her own paycheck. She gets very emotional and I get very emotional. She hasn't had the opportunity before."

In his first role with Easter Seals, Bisesti sat on the advisory board for Camp Merry Heart, a camp in Hackettstown outfitted to accommodate individuals with disabilities and operated by Easter Seals New Jersey. Camp Merry Heart offers programs where individuals with disabilities can participate in recreational activities that they normally might not be able to do, like canoeing or using a zip line. Bisesti loves the outdoors, fishing and hiking, so serving on Camp Merry Heart's advisory board was a great match for him.

Working with Camp Merry Heart was an educational experience for Bisesti. He got to learn about the types of services that Easter Seals provides and witness their work firsthand. He also learned a great deal about people with disabilities.

"They are people like you and me," Bisesti said. "To be quite honest, everyone in life will have some sort of disability. Maybe at one point, before I got involved at this level, I saw people as having disabilities or not having disabilities, but I've realized we're all people and we all have different needs and whatever we can do to serve those needs should be done."

After his experience at Camp Merry Heart, Bisesti said, "it was a no brainer" to do whatever he could to help out Easter Seals. He has been sitting on the board since 2011 and became chair in October 2013. Since becoming chair, one of his biggest goals has been recruiting new board members to the

organization. One of his greatest successes so far has been bringing in Eric Kunkel.

Kunkel gained national attention this past January when he sat next to and engaged in conversation with a little girl with autism during a plane ride. The girl's mother wrote a blog post that went viral thanking Kunkel, who at the time was an anonymous stranger, for the way he interacted with her daughter. Bisesti first encountered the story on Facebook, before Kunkel's identity was revealed.

Bisesti said that the story "really hit home with me that somebody took time to engage that little girl and really could have easily ignored her and didn't."

A few days later it was revealed that the story was about Kunkel, a longtime friend and former colleague of Bisesti's.

"I was blown away, not because I wouldn't expect it of Eric—he's that kind of guy—but that a story I read and really touch me happened to be about a friend of mine," he said.

Bisesti has a list of people that he was going through to attempt to recruit them to Easter Seals. Coincidentally, at the time Kunkel's story went viral, he was next on Bisesti's list. So Bisesti called him up and said, "We could do something great together, why don't you come talk to Easter Seals about joining the board?" Kunkel agreed.

Bisesti's passion for the work that Easter Seals does has not gone unnoticed. Anysa Holder, the director of marketing for Easter Seals New Jersey called Bisesti's zeal "impressive, since he doesn't have a natural connection to the cause. No one in his family has a disability."

Helen Drobnis, the Chief Advancement Officer at Easter Seals New Jersey agreed that Bisesti is exactly what an organization hopes for.

"What you want is someone to be present and believe in what's you're trying to accomplish," she said. "He is enthusiastic about all our services, he's just perfect. I don't even know how to explain."

For Bisesti, the annual Walk With Me event is one of the highlights of his experience working with Easter Seals. He thinks that attending Walk With Me and witnessing the work that Easter Seals does is very moving for the people that attend and inspires them to work with the organization.

Walk With Me starts with registration at 9 a.m. The central event of the day, beginning at 10:30, is a one-mile walk through the stadium.

Celebrities show up to the event, including Miss New Jersey and Snoopy, who is there every year and "a great draw for the kids."


There is also a 5K run that mostly takes place outside of the stadium, but ends right at the 50-yard line. Bisesti said he believes that, for runners, one of the most alluring aspects of the event "is finishing on the field where the Super Bowl happened."

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