

A Passion for Giving

Children's Museum of the East End



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With its mission to spark imagination and foster learning for children of all backgrounds and abilities and to build strong connections within the East End community by providing playful experiences, the Children's Museum of the East End (CMEE,) located in Bridgehampton, NY, is committed to providing full and equitable access to arts and cultural resources. I had the pleasure of speaking with CMEE's Board Co-Chairs, Carolyn Pressly-Ryan, owner of Carolyn Pressly Interiors, Dr. Jock Percy, the Founder, General Partner, and CIO of Pacific Atlantic Ventures and General Partner of Lightning Capital, as well as CMEE President Steve Long. As we unpacked all the CMEE has accomplished during this time of crisis, it became evident that CMEE's leadership has guided the organization to go above and beyond museum experiences to become an essential pillar of the local community.

The East End is one of the most ethnically diverse areas on Long Island. CMEE analyzed the demographics of Eastern Long Island and realized that Spanish-speaking families compose 1/3 of the Museum's attendance. Steve provided the following statistics, "while Spanish-speaking immigrants compose 16% of Suffolk County's population, the percentage living in the eastern

portion of the County is almost 25%. Immigrants from Colombia, Ecuador, Mexico, and other Latin American countries now account for over 50% of the student population in local school districts" he said. "This reality sharply contrasts with how the Hamptons are presented on TV and film, as the East End's year-round population is among the poorest on Long Island. East Hampton, Southampton, and Riverhead have the highest rates of poverty among Long Island's 13 Townships, said Steve."

Steve explained that CMEE stands out in several critical areas, both nationally and regionally. "CMEE is the only children's museum in the nation currently operating a food pantry. It's the only museum in Suffolk County with permanent bilingual exhibitions and is a provider of family literacy programming. It is one of only two museums in the country to serve as a Head Start Center," he said. "In addition, CMEE is the only museum on Eastern Long Island offering regularly-scheduled programming for children with disabilities and is the only museum on Eastern Long Island offering free admission to EBT cardholders," Steve said.

During the pandemic, CMEE, like most organizations, had to swiftly transition to virtual fundraising events, as they were losing over \$25,000 per week in admissions, membership and event revenue. Jock reflected on how the CMEE Board stepped up to make sure operations would continue. "That's a function of crisis, it brings people together. We've got such a great board of trustees and everybody stood up and got together and got to work, said Jock. "They are a tremendous community and have a really solid approach to thinking forward. The museum's never been in a stronger position as far as board engagement, which is an upside from an event such as this. "

A Passion for Giving is a monthly column where financial and nonprofit foundation veteran Peter J. Klein, CFA - Chief Investment Officer/ Founder of ALINE Wealth Management at Hightower Advisors and President/Treasurer of the Claire Friedlander Family Foundation, interviews local philanthropists to explore why they give and offer inspiration to others looking to make an impact.



CMEE's Co-Chairs Carolyn Pressly-Ryan & Dr. Jock Percy

(Photo credit: Rossa Cole)

"Our Board ensured that the Museum would not be another victim of the crisis. Instead, we committed CMEE to serve as "first responders," pivoting to address the most critical needs of struggling families," said Jock. A most significant transition was the creation of the food pantry in response to the needs of the community.

Carolyn cited CMEE's commitment to outreach and to being a community hub. This concept flourished during the pandemic when CMEE's community outreach staff created grass-roots opportunities to meet the families outside of the museum setting by bringing educational programming to the local laundromat. "The children were captive audiences with nothing to do so we brought in educational programming while their parents were doing their laundry," Carolyn said. She explained that "CMEE's Trustees are leading the effort to update our five-year strategic plan and we are looking at ways in which the museum really has expanded beyond the bounds of a brick-and-mortar institution. Families know they can get their programming for their children, some additional child care and also some food on the table," said Carolyn.

Kudos to CMEE and their passionate leadership who've guided the museum to become a touch-stone for the East End that offers families a vital social connection and hope for the future. For more information about the Children's Museum of the East End, please visit their website.

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