

MIKE STEWART

Kindering CEO

BY CATHY DUCHAMP | cduchamp@bizjournals.com

Q&A

Mike Stewart remembers Room 5 at Seattle's Meany Middle School. It was the special education classroom for fellow

students he only saw during art, music and the gym.

"The special ed program was not inclusive. For me, that was my first eye-opening experience that showed the system needed improvement and that there could be better support for people with developmental delays or disabilities," he says.

When he was 26, Stewart showed up in a suit with a printed resume in hand at Boyer Children's Clinic, a Seattle nonprofit that serves children up to age 3 with disabilities or developmental delays. He got an administrative assistant job there, and worked up the ranks to executive director, a position he held for 15 years. Last fall, he became CEO of Bellevue-based Kindering, the region's largest neurodevelopmental support organization for children from birth to age 10.

In an interview with the Business Journal, Stewart talked about the influence of his parents, the importance of connections and why businesses are critical partners.

Tell me about your family. My dad was a cardiologist at the University of Washington medical center. One

ABOUT MIKE

Age: 55

Hometown: Born in Bellevue, family moved to Seattle when he was 3 years old

Residence: Wedgwood neighborhood

Education: Bachelor's from Occidental College; MBA from Seattle University

Family: Wife, three grown children, doodle-dog

Favorite sport: Soccer.

"My family went to the (2015) Women's World Cup in Vancouver. That was amazing. Looking forward to World Cup matches here in Seattle."

time, there was a gentleman with a heart issue on a cruise in Alaska, he and his wife were from France, they were sent to Seattle. My dad determined they didn't have a place to stay so they lived with us for three months while they recovered. That was my mom and dad's ability to extend care beyond the technical parts of the role. My mom actively participated in (public schools) as a volunteer and employee. She was there to make system change and make sure that the children that were farthest away from justice, access, equity, had the additional supports they needed.

You worked in banking briefly. I moved to San Francisco in 1994 and took a temp job at Wells Fargo Bank. It was their national headquarters, and they had just gone through a merger. I was only able to use last names of all the individuals; that's the era we're talking about. It provided me work ethic. It pushed me to advocate for myself, whether it was needing additional skills, making sure that I was on a path to grow.

Why not stick with banking? You could make a lot of money. Based on my upbringing, nonprofit work – that is where my heart was. Banking provided me with a lot of learning opportunities and an understanding of that corporate (culture), but my heart moved to



the nonprofit sector.

You went to Garfield High School in Seattle. How have those connections helped you? If I'm on LinkedIn and I see someone with a Garfield connection, there's almost an unwritten communication that you have. My closest friends, there are about 15 of us that still have an open text thread. I have a

friend that's an ER doctor, a friend that's a restaurant owner, a friend that's a teacher. All of us went our different career paths, but that Garfield connection is something that's so deep and will be lifelong.

You were selected for Leadership Tomorrow. What sort of connections has that helped build? You have access to a cohort of



MARCUS R. DONNER | PSBJ

business and nonprofit leaders. For me it was wonderful way to build my confidence and understand the challenges of the corporate sector. I was in that program from 2008 to 2009. It came at a pivotal time. I was the assistant director at Boyer. I was in the succession plan to become the director when Judy Moore, then the director, and my longtime mentor, died suddenly.

That must have been hard. Yes. I focused on supporting Boyer staff through their grief. We kept Judy's office open so people could visit and share their experiences.

Tell me about another tough leadership experience. Well, this year, when there was a bill in the state Legislature that would have cut state funding for early support

for infants and toddlers' services – it would have cut funding for the program by 17% and cost Kindering \$2.4 million. It was a real surprise. There's research that shows for every dollar spent on early intervention, the cost savings down the line is \$17. We had to activate our network of advocates – Kindering families, alums, business leaders. Thankfully, the

A DAY IN THE LIFE

We asked Mike to break down a typical workday:



5 a.m.: Wake up, go with wife to Orangetheory for a workout



6:15 a.m.: Walk dog; make breakfast smoothie (spinach, berries, almond milk)



9:30 a.m. - Noon: Meetings with senior leaders, staff, internal committees, community partners



Noon - 12:30 p.m.: Lunch



12:30 p.m. - 5:30 p.m.: Board meetings, donor calls, community partner meetings



5:45 p.m.: Head home



8 p.m.: Triage emails, prepare for next day



I want to continue to do outreach so no child goes without early support services”

Kindering CEO Mike Stewart

bill didn't pass.

The Kindering board of directors has a lot of business leaders. Why is that important? Government funding, Medicaid and insurance make up most of our budget, but we don't want to turn any family away. We rely on philanthropy to maintain our \$4 million pool for uncompensated care, and businesses help with that. And a lot of board members have personal connections with the organization, being a parent at one time, on an unexpected journey, not knowing what their child's outcome would be, and now they want to help other families.

You say Kindering is the last chapter in your career. What do you want to get done? About 17% of the population in Washington has a child who is at risk for developmental delay, but we only see about 9% of them. I want to continue to do outreach so that no child goes without early support services, whether that's special education, therapies or family support. We expanded rapidly about a decade ago, and now we need to focus on sustainability, doing as much as we can with the people and facilities we have.

This interview was edited for length and clarity.