Susan and Mark O’Leary: ‘PACER is the gold standard!’

Mark O’Leary, chief marketing officer at SPS Commerce, one of the world’s largest retail commerce supply chain companies, joined PACER’s Board of Directors at the suggestion of his friend Matt Woods, who is a past president of the Board. Mark is now President of PACER’s Board. “Matt and I grew up together, and Matt knew that my son Bob is on the autism spectrum,” Mark said. “Paula Goldberg asked me to be on the Board, and of course you can’t say no to Paula!”

Mark believes PACER is unique. “It is so rare that organizations come together and have the kind of effectiveness PACER does. The women who came together to form PACER have impacted millions of lives,” he said. “The PACER model of helping parents advocate for their children has meant that PACER has such a great effect on so many people.”

He has found Board service to be very fulfilling. “The PACER Board is a group of very diverse and engaged people. We all came to the PACER Board for different reasons, but we are all aligned in wanting to help PACER grow. Everyone is very supportive of PACER’s mission, and you can’t be involved without knowing the importance of what PACER’s staff does every day: providing parents and their children with what they need at challenging points in their lives.”

Mark and his wife Susan are among those parents. Their involvement with PACER began many years ago. “I first attended PACER’s two-day parent leadership training when our son Bob was four or five years old. It was an absolutely great experience,” Susan O’Leary said. Today, Bob is 17 years old and a high school senior. The O’Learys also have a typical daughter, Mamie, who is 14. After participating in the parent leadership training, Susan went on to serve on her school district’s Special Education Advisory Committee (SEAC).

Susan worked with PACER advocates when Bob was younger and attended several PACER workshops. She found those about Individualized Education Programs (IEPs) to be particularly helpful. “This was my child, my baby boy, and it’s hard to take the emotion out of it, but at the IEP workshops you learn about the types of testing, you learn about the components and building blocks of the IEP. It is so helpful to have that training and information,” Susan said.

Mark added, “PACER is not just for parents of young children, though when you have young children with disabilities you are sometimes scared and don’t know what to expect, and it’s great that PACER is there for help. PACER helps all children who are bullied, and children and

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**Tech for Girls: STEM* fun for girls with disabilities**

*Science, Technology, Engineering, and Math*

For the past 15 years, PACER has offered girls with disabilities the chance to explore science and technology while learning valuable skills and meeting other girls in a welcoming atmosphere. Tech for Girls workshops, for girls ages 11 to 18, are held eight to ten times yearly on Saturdays at no cost to participants.

“We keep the topics broad so the girls experience a wide variety of STEM activities,” explained Tina Hanson, Assistive Technology Specialist at PACER’s Simon Technology Center, who coordinates Tech for Girls. Recent workshops have included Chariot Racing with Robots (the girls created their own chariots, attached them to Sphero robots, and coded the robots to drive, race, and interact with other robots) and Space Exploration.

“At February’s Space Exploration workshop, the girls made planets out of yarn and cardboard to provide a visual,” Tina explained. “They also used virtual reality headsets to take a tour of the planets in our solar system, and took a spacewalk at the International Space Station. They learned what it was like to be an astronaut floating in space and thought it was fun!”

Minnesota Education Commissioner Mary Cathryn Ricker also attended February’s Space Exploration workshop. “The Commissioner came to observe, but she jumped right in and helped out, handing out materials and talking to the girls,” Tina said. “She also sat in on the debriefing we did with the team after the workshop.”

Peer mentoring is a key part of Tech for Girls. Along with Tina and other PACER staff, the workshops are also supported by local teen volunteers. For many years, the Green Girls, an Eagan robotics team, worked with PACER. After the team graduated from high school, they recommended another robotics group, Team 2220. “The peer mentorship aspect is phenomenal,” Tina said. “They love having people in their age group work with them. Friendships grow out of Tech for Girls.”

While COVID-19 put a crimp in the spring workshop schedule, plans are underway for late summer and fall Tech for Girls workshops and as they are scheduled, will be posted at PACER.org/workshops.

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youth of all ages who have disabilities. We plan to lean on PACER for Bob’s transition from high school.”

Susan said, “PACER is the gold standard! It is so rewarding, as a mom, to be able to tell people about PACER. Whether it’s someone at a workout studio or a friend of a friend, I guide them to PACER so they can have their child’s needs met. No matter if it’s bullying or not having an IEP or maybe a disagreement with school about the IEP, PACER is so good and well respected.

“When you mention PACER to the school district, they listen,” Susan said. “PACER has such gravitas! When Bob had some challenging behaviors and the school wanted to handle it a certain way, I said, I talked to PACER and this is what they said. I had talked to a PACER advocate so I knew what my rights and the school’s rights were. The school was happy to listen. It’s great to have PACER’s help in your back pocket.”

“It’s helpful to schools, too,” Mark said. “Sometimes they are not informed about new laws, and PACER is always up-to-date, and folks at the schools appreciate that.”

When Mark was asked to be the President of PACER’s Board, he talked it over with Susan. “We had a lot going on. It was a busy time, but Susan said, ‘Of course you should do it! How can you say no?’

“We have a passion around the Board and PACER’s mission, and I am thankful that I am able to help.”
'An enduring legacy'
Why we give to PACER’s endowment

The families of children with disabilities, as well as all children who are bullied, count on PACER. That’s why PACER has established an endowment fund with a $20 million goal: to ensure that the PACER programs families need will always be there.

Your gift to PACER’s endowment is permanently invested; only the annual investment income is spent. Now more than ever, especially in light of the coronavirus, PACER’s endowment is important to help reduce the impact of economic downturns and fluctuating funding.

There are many reasons people give to PACER’s endowment. Some have a family member with a disability. Others give in honor of a friend or family member. And there are some, like endowment fund donor Al Apple, who give because they are impressed with PACER’s work.

“When you give to a charity, you want to make sure your gift is used wisely,” Al said. “I think PACER gives our community the ‘bigger bang for the buck’ than any other charity I know of.” As a retired Certified Public Accountant (CPA), Al’s words have special weight. He has no family members with disabilities; Al contributes to the endowment fund because he believes so strongly in PACER’s important work. “I’ve been with PACER from the beginning, and I know that PACER has community-wide and now national support. I love what PACER stands for and what it’s achieved.”

Supporting PACER is a family tradition for David and Jennifer Rowland. Both David and Jennifer have played major volunteer roles at PACER. Their involvement stemmed from David’s father, the late Derm Rowland, who was involved with PACER for 30 years. “My dad’s relationship with PACER started out as a business relationship; he was PACER’s landlord at the office space on Chicago Avenue. Almost immediately, the people, the principles, the mission just sort of grabbed him,” David said.

Derm was instrumental in helping PACER buy its current building and was a longtime member of PACER’s advisory board. When he died in 2012, “it was only natural to request that memorials go to PACER, because it was so important in my father’s life. He wanted to ensure PACER would live on,” David said. It was then that David established the endowment fund at PACER in Derm’s name, and many of his friends honored Derm’s memory by making generous contributions.

Endowment fund donor Don McNeil said, “As the parent of two children with disabilities, I know firsthand how important PACER is. Families like mine count on PACER. I’m honored to do anything I can to make sure that families of children with disabilities, and those who are bullied, can count on PACER for help.”

PACER’s Executive Director, Paula Goldberg, added, “We are so grateful to our endowment donors, and I want to take this opportunity to wish longtime supporter Al Apple a happy 90th birthday! A gift to PACER’s endowment enables PACER to create innovative new programs without taking away resources from the PACER programs families depend on every day.”

“Thank you for considering a gift to PACER’s endowment. Please call me at (952) 838-9000 or email me at pgoldberg@PACER.org to discuss your gift.”

-Paula Goldberg, PACER’s Executive Director
Ages birth to three: Parents as teachers, advocates, and educational partners

Science has taught us that the first few years in a child’s development, when their brain is developing rapidly, are critical for success in school and later in life. When a child has physical disabilities, a medical diagnosis, or is not reaching their milestones on schedule due to developmental delays, it can be a difficult time for a family. If a parent knows or suspects there is an issue with their child’s development, it’s important that they reach out for help.

That help is just a phone call or email away: when a family needs assistance, PACER is here. “For children ages birth to three with a medical diagnosis, disability, or developmental delay, there are early intervention services available,” said Judy Swett, PACER’s Early Childhood Coordinator. “We let parents know that the school district, through their special education department, is responsible for providing services to families of children ages birth to three. PACER’s staff of early childhood advocates is here to assist families in navigating the special education system, understanding their rights and responsibilities, and learning the best way to resolve any conflicts that might occur when dealing with the child’s school district.

Early intervention services focus on the fact that children learn best through what are referred to as natural learning opportunities: play and everyday routines and activities. Families and other caregivers are taught strategies to use throughout the child’s day, using these natural learning opportunities to support the child in learning new skills. Research has also recognized the important role of parents as their child’s first teachers. Through talking, singing, reading, and playing with their child, parents help them develop and grow, and can track their child’s development by charting the child’s achievement of developmental milestones.

Having help from PACER in understanding a complex system makes such a difference in easing a parent’s worries.” Judy added that a parent who understands their rights and responsibilities is on the road to becoming an effective advocate for their child.

The most effective way to ensure a child has what they need to be successful is for the school district and the parents, a child’s first and best teachers, to collaborate. “The school district works with the family to plan and implement needed services, which are spelled out in an Individual Family Service Plan (IFSP). The services detailed in the IFSP are then provided by professionals who work with families in their homes or with childcare providers in a childcare setting. Sometimes when the parent hears ‘school district’ and ‘special education,’ they think of a school setting,” Judy explained, “But for children younger than three, it’s most effective to have services provided at home or in a childcare setting.

“PACER helps families through workshops, webinars, publications, and one-on-one advocacy support. No matter how big or small the question or concern, PACER early childhood advocates are available to assist families. We hope they will pick up a phone or send us an email. Though the COVID-19 pandemic has resulted in challenging times, one thing remains the same: PACER is committed to helping families.”

PACER is here to help

To reach a PACER parent advocate, call (952) 838-9000 or email PACER@PACER.org.
When the auditorium is full and the lights go down at PACER’s Benefit on Nov. 14, Chris Moore will take the stage as emcee. Chris first emceed a PACER event at the first Los Angeles Gala for PACER's National Bullying Prevention Center in Sept. 2018. He was onstage at last year's Benefit. “PACER's Benefit will be a fun and fantastic night, and I hope many people attend!”

Chris is a movie producer and director who produced Academy Award nominated movies *Good Will Hunting* and *Manchester by the Sea*, among others; he also produced the Project Greenlight television series. Chris was first introduced to PACER by the late David Goldberg, son of Paula Goldberg, PACER’s Executive Director and co-founder. Chris and David met when they were students at Harvard University and the two became friends. When PACER’s National Business Advisory Board was founded, Chris became one of the first members. He continues to serve on the Board. “PACER does such important work,” Chris said. “I’m glad to do anything I can to help.”

One of Chris’s contributions to PACER has been his leadership in motivating staff to communicate PACER’s message through videos. He has spent time at PACER’s office, teaching the staff video skills. “In my professional job, I look for stories with emotion and authenticity; PACER has so many to tell.” He added, “Emotional story telling can change people. They are moved when they watch emotional stories like the ones from PACER.”

Chris is especially looking forward to seeing Smokey Robinson perform. “I love Motown music. Smokey Robinson is awesome — I’m glad I don’t have to follow him onstage! I think the feeling of Smokey’s music is great for a PACER event.”

“I’m grateful that I can contribute to the tremendous work PACER does for children with disabilities and all children who are bullied.”

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**Peggy Widtfeldt, age 99, is a bright spot in PACER’s front office**

Rain or shine, snow or sleet, if it's Tuesday or Thursday, Peggy Widtfeldt is at her desk at PACER. “Peggy has an amazing work ethic,” said her supervisor, PACER Office Manager Nancy Kleve.

Peggy, who turned 99 on May 10, has worked at PACER for more than 25 years. Two days a week, she answers phones, works on special projects, and handles a variety of administrative duties – always with a smile. “I really like the people I talk to,” she said. “That’s my favorite part of the job.”

Peggy was eight years into her retirement from Plymouth Congregational Church when she ran into her neighbor, Paula Goldberg, at the dry cleaner. “Peggy had so many talents that I asked her to come work with us at PACER,” Paula remembers.

Though Peggy is modest about the work she does at PACER, her supervisor sings her praises. “Peggy is a bright spot in the front office,” Nancy said. “She truly believes in PACER’s mission, and genuinely cares about helping every caller. She is so patient, kind, and compassionate. She is a good example for all of us.”

“PACER has a future without limit,” Peggy said. “The needs are great — and so are the possibilities.”

Peggy can’t wait for PACER’s staff to move back to the office from their current remote work. “I miss everyone, and I want to be able to help PACER families again,” she said.
Maleenia Mohabir: Supporting parents of children with mental health needs

Maleenia Mohabir, like many PACER staff members, is the parent of children with disabilities. Maleenia, who is a Children's Mental Health and Emotional/Behavioral Disorders Specialist and Advocate, has a 21-year-old son who is on the autism spectrum, and her younger son, who is 16, has mental health and behavioral issues.

Maleenia’s younger son led her to PACER Center. “It was four or five years ago, and my son had some serious behavioral challenges at school,” Maleenia recalled. Though she disagreed with how the school was handling her son, “I didn’t know what my rights were, what I could do.”

At the urging of her mother, who worked as a special education teacher for 37 years, Maleenia picked up the phone and called PACER. “My mom had been telling me to call PACER for a long time. She said, ‘Now, you have to call.’”

Renelle Nelson, PACER’s Children’s Mental Health and Emotional–Behavioral Disorders Project Coordinator, answered Maleenia’s call. “Renelle really helped me to understand the process,” Maleenia said. “I learned about my rights and my son’s rights. I gained the confidence to go back to the school.”

Shortly after that, she attended PACER’s leadership training program for parents of children with disabilities. About a year later, PACER had an opening for an advocate, and Maleenia applied for the job.

Maleenia has now been with PACER for three years, using her skills and experiences as a parent to empower other parents to advocate for their children. She serves on two statewide advisory panels: the Minnesota Department of Education’s (MDE) special education advisory panel, and the children’s mental health subcommittee of Minnesota Department of Human Services’ mental health advisory panel. “It’s so important to be able to share the parent perspective and my experience as an advocate.

“The work I do at PACER is mainly with parents of children with mental health needs and behavioral challenges. I bring a background of working with a child at home who has those challenges.”

Maleenia works with parents to learn tools and strategies that are helpful to them, such as different perspectives and ways to talk to the school in an objective, fact-based way.

“One thing I learned from Renelle is the importance of ‘can’t’ versus ‘won’t.’ Rather than saying a child won’t perform the way we want him to, we use the lens of why he can’t perform this way. That helps us address the barriers the child is facing,” Maleenia said.

Reflecting on her work, Maleenia said, “When parents say to me, ‘My pediatrician, my therapist, or our social worker told me to call PACER,’ it feels good to know people see PACER as a great resource.

“When I am able to help parents take the steps they need to deal with their concerns — when PACER can provide the resources they need — that feels really important.”

Support PACER with SurveyMonkey

PACER supporters can sign up on SurveyMonkey to receive short surveys from SurveyMonkey customers who need opinions on a variety of topics. For every survey completed, SurveyMonkey makes a donation to PACER, and participants have the opportunity to win $100 in an instant win game. Participants’ identities and information remain confidential. Sign up at contribute.surveymonkey.com/charity/PACER.
Kindness Champions named

PACER’s National Bullying Prevention Center recently announced the winners of the first Students with Solutions contest sponsored by Planet Fitness. Students were encouraged to let their imaginations run wild, using just about any artistic medium to convey the contest’s theme of intentional actions of kindness, acceptance, and inclusion.

“The quality and number of submissions was amazing!” said Julie Hertzog, director of PACER’s National Bullying Prevention Center. “We had a really great response from across the country, and students used video, comics, drawings, poetry, and short stories to express their heartfelt messages. It was hard to choose just two Kindness Champions!”

The grand prize winners were student groups from Grande Innovation Academy in Casa Grande, Arizona, and Parker Junior High in Flossmoor, Illinois. Each school was awarded a “buddy bench,” a piece of outdoor furniture that promotes inclusion. Buddy benches are placed on a school’s playground. “A student can sit on a buddy bench when they are feeling alone; it’s a cue for other students to reach out to them,” Julie explained.

Both groups submitted video entries. They are available to be viewed on PACER’s YouTube channel (Grande Innovation Academy: https://tinyurl.com/ycwmttnd; Parker Junior High: https://tinyurl.com/y8gt84m9).

October is National Bullying Prevention Month

Founded by PACER’s National Bullying Prevention Center in 2006, National Bullying Prevention Month unites individuals from across the nation and around the world to campaign to keep youth safe from bullying. The goal is to create kinder, more accepting, and inclusive environments for all students.

There are many creative ways to get involved throughout October from celebrating Unity Day on Oct. 21, 2020, to sharing PACER’s innovative short video series PACERTalks About Bullying, or hosting a school or community event. For more information or ideas about how you can get involved this October, visit PACER.org/bullying/nbpm.
PACER Benefit featuring Smokey Robinson rescheduled for Nov. 14

From top of the line entertainment to once-in-a-lifetime prizes at the exciting live auction and everything in between, PACER strives to put together an unforgettable evening that will keep guests coming back every year.

This year the legendary Smokey Robinson of Motown fame headlines the show. “We have been lucky to have wonderful entertainers in the past, and I think Smokey Robinson will stand out as one of our best ever,” said PACER Center Executive Director Paula Goldberg. “When I tell people he is our headliner this year, they are very excited! I am so happy that PACER audiences will have the opportunity to experience Motown in Minneapolis when Smokey takes the stage.”

Smokey founded The Miracles while still in high school, and their single “Shop Around” was Motown’s first #1 hit on the R&B charts. In addition to his many hits with The Miracles, including “You’ve Really Got a Hold on Me,” “Tracks of My Tears,” and “I Second that Emotion,” he has written more than 4,000 songs for other performers, including The Temptations, Mary Wells, and Marvin Gaye.

Smokey Robinson continues to thrill sold-out audiences around the world with his incredible voice, impeccable timing, and profound sense of lyric. Don’t miss your chance to see him live at the PACER Benefit!