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About This Series: Good Works is published in partnership with the La Crosse Community Foundation. Each Monday, we feature an individual involved in a cause featured in the La Crosse Giving Catalog, sharing what keeps them going, occasional insights into their lives outside their nonprofit work and what inspires them to serve others. To support this week's cause, visit lacrossegivingcatalog.com.

Terri Gowey

Chileda

While there's some debate about the meaning of the word "chileda," there's no question that the local nonprofit organization Chiledda means hope and miracles for the families it serves. Marking its 50th anniversary this year, Chiledda aims to improve the quality of life for individuals with cognitive challenges and extraordinary behavioral needs.

Today, Chiledda is working on expanding its Development and Learning Center to provide a place for residents, clients and their families to learn, grow and have fun together. The expansion includes a sensory room with an indoor play structure design to help children develop play skills, sharpen motor skills and burn off some energy. It can be used as part of therapy or as a fun reward following a therapy session. Chiledda hopes the community will help support the initiative and contribute to the miracles that happen there.

Terri Gowey is the chief operations officer at Chiledda.

What would it look like if you could create an indoor play structure just for you?

If I were to create an indoor play structure, I would create a play structure for people of any height and ability. I would include tunnels and climbing spaces next to walking paths that anyone could use. I would create the structure so parents could navigate it alongside their children. I would also include large tunnels so adults could go through them with their children. The tunnel and paths would also be wheelchair accessible with a ramp going down next to a slide — so that anyone can go down the ramp while kids or adults can go down the slide.

Playing with your kids is important, and an indoor play structure is a great place to play. It can be challenging maneuvering some of these play structures as an adult, so a play structure designed for adults and kids would eliminate any hesitation of parents joining kids.

How did you choose this career?

As a kid, I remember seeing the Chileda Classic commercials and wanting to work here someday. When I was a junior in college in the psychology program, I was hired at Chileda as a program assistant 22 years ago. I fell in love with the mission and seeing how all the different roles at Chileda working together can help children and families.

I held many different roles over the years. As a case manager, I worked directly with the parents and heard firsthand the pain they felt when having to make the tough decision to send their child to residential treatment. The most rewarding part of the job was seeing children be able to return home or to a group home closer to home or even their adoptive home. Seeing this progress keeps me at Chileda and working to help more families and children.

If Chileda received an unrestricted grant of \$1 million, how would you use it?

There are many underserved families with children with disabilities. We have historically served children in residential centers but, over the past few years, have expanded our services to the greater La Crosse community. Families are continuing to seek services to keep their children in their homes and help them be more successful.

If Chileda received an unrestricted grant of \$1 million, we would use this to expand our mission to help more families and children. We would increase our services to add an occupational therapist and speech therapist to provide holistic treatment. We would also provide services such as parent support groups, peer support groups, and sibling groups beyond what we currently offer. We would offer more social groups for kids to improve their social skills and build friendships. The \$1 million would be used as the seed money to launch these services.