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2012 Health-Care Heroes Awards

'Dumbest guy in the room' paves road to success

Allied Health Winner

Premium content from Atlanta Business Chronicle by Giannina Smith Bedford , Contributing Writer

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Don Mueller feels blessed to be able to contribute to the lives of children. As vice president of operations for Children's Healthcare of Atlanta and executive director of the Marcus Autism Center, he oversees the human, fiscal and capital resources that make their mission of helping children possible. For his leadership, Mueller is the winner in the Allied Health Professional category for Atlanta Business Chronicle's 2012 Health-Care Heroes Awards.

"At the end of the day the opportunity to help children is probably the highlight of what I do each and every day," he said. "I love to build programs and direct people and have a vision and implement the vision, but after it's all said and done, it's really just about the kids. There is nothing better in life than helping kids and helping parents and giving them the resources they need."

Mueller joined Children's in 2000 as director of tertiary service contracting. He was promoted to director of transplant services in 2003 — a move that took him from the finance side of business into hospital operations.

Responsible for the solid organ transplant programs, the dialysis unit and the gastrointestinal program, Mueller helped grow the program into one of the biggest in the country.

"I'm most proud of helping to build the transplant program that now has transplanted more than 1,000 children with remarkable outcomes. I'm extremely proud of that," he said.

Mueller rose to the role of vice president of strategy and business development in which he helped establish the 10-year Vision 2018 strategy aimed at positioning Children’s to be a top pediatric hospital in clinical, research, teaching and wellness. He also helped negotiate the purchase of the Marcus Autism Center and bring it into Children’s in August 2008.

As the largest clinical provider of autism-related services in the country, the Marcus Autism Center served the needs of more than 5,600 children in 2011 — some patients that traveled from across the Southeast and the world for care. Under Mueller’s leadership, the Center has grown its volume by 41 percent and decreased the waiting list by more than 30 percent.

“There is a huge need for autism services; unfortunately not a lot of insurance companies pay for them. We have maximized our ability to serve children by putting in a lot of efficiencies,” Mueller said. “Now we are building a research component on to what we are doing, which will extend our reach well beyond the state of Georgia.”

Mueller played an integral role in the recent recruitment of Ami Klin as the Marcus Autism Center’s first chief of autism and related disorders and a team from Yale University School of Medicine that is poised to further the research of autism detection and intervention. The recruitment of the team took wide community effort, Mueller said, involving the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, Georgia Tech, Emory University, Georgia State University and The University of Georgia as well as Children’s Healthcare of Atlanta.

“The autism community here in Atlanta leveraged the great work that [Bernie Marcus](#) began over 20 years ago, resulting in the recruitment of internationally known Dr. Ami Klin from Yale along with a team,” Mueller said. “Marcus Autism Center is really positioned to transform the future for autism so it is really exciting. What we are doing here is not just going to affect people here in Georgia, it’s going to affect people around the country and potentially around the world.”

Since graduating from The Catholic University of America, Mueller has served in roles on the payer side as well as the provider side of health care. He brings his expertise and dedication to a variety of organizations outside Children’s as well. He sits on the board of directors of the Ronald McDonald House Charities Atlanta and previously served on the Georgia Transplant Foundation, the Georgia Coalition on Donation and the American Liver Foundation boards. In 2005, Atlanta Business Chronicle selected him as one of Atlanta’s Top 40 Under 40 and he was recently elected to Leadership Atlanta.

Much of his time, however, is spent educating the public on autism and the needs of children that suffer from the disorder. From negotiating case rates with insurance companies to fundraising — the center raises more than \$3

million a year to support its services — Mueller admits his job is challenging but credits his team at Children's and the community for much of the success.

"It's funny because I'm just the business guy, but we've got some of the brightest minds in the world at the Marcus Autism Center so it's fun to be the dumbest guy in the room and really help empower them to change the future of autism," he said.

Don Mueller

- Title: Executive director of the Marcus Autism Center and vice president of operations for Children's Healthcare of Atlanta
- Education: Bachelor's degree from The Catholic University of America; MBA from Loyola College in Maryland
- Age: 41
- Top career achievement: Helping build the Children's Healthcare of Atlanta transplant program; establishing Vision 2018 and bringing the Marcus Autism Center to Children's Healthcare of Atlanta
- Prior jobs: Vice president of strategy and business development at Children's Healthcare of Atlanta
- Hobbies: Spending time with family, the outdoors, hunting and fishing
Family: Wife, Dallas Mueller; children, Luke, Diana and Harper

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