

First woman takes helm of Executive Service Corps

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Kristina Van Liew, Tom Read



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Kristina Van Liew is a corporate executive, mother of three and community volunteer.

Not retired, not by a long shot.

But the 42-year-old Naperville woman recently was elected the first female chairman of the Executive Service Corps of Chicago, a group of retired and semiretired corporate leaders and professionals who volunteer their expertise to nonprofit organizations.

"I've probably always been happiest when I'm busy," said Van Liew, in what might qualify as a major understatement.

With days that begin at 4 a.m. and end at 11 p.m., the corporate go-getter travels several times a month as the first vice president and institutional consultant for Merrill Lynch's Private Banking and Investment Group. But family and community service have always been part of the mix, she says.

So when Van Liew was invited to join ESC's board three years ago as one of its first nonmember directors, she was intrigued by the organization's mission.

"You think the end goal is having a successful career and retiring when, no, that's just the training," Van Liew said. "What these people have shown me is that's when you have the pedigree to turn around and really make a difference."

Van Liew takes the helm when ESC is writing a new chapter in the 30-year history it celebrated this month by expanding its reach and its mission.

ESC volunteer Tom Read of Downers Grove was the head of the board committee that recruited Van Liew three years ago as part of an effort to bring fresh blood to the organization. She joined as one of the first board members under the age of 40.

"She's been just superb," Read said. "She has excellent strategic sense, excellent judgment and is excellent working with people."

Former advertising executive Ralph Rydholm joined ESC five years ago and since then has watched Van Liew, who holds a master's degree in finance and marketing, push through a new marketing plan for the nonprofit.

"She's terrific. She'll definitely want more exposure (for the organization)," said Rydholm, a member of the ESC board that elected Van Liew as its chairman.

"I decided to call her Hurricane Kristina because that's how she gets things done," he said. "She's a powerful force to be reckoned with."

30 years of service

Van Liew said she is stepping to the head of an organization that has an impressive record of service. ESC volunteers gave more than 21,000 hours working on more than 160 projects last year.

"ESC's role is capacity building. As an organization, its mission is to help strengthen other nonprofits by equipping them with skills and resources they otherwise would not have access to," she said.

ESC's 250 volunteers work with nonprofits in areas such as strategic planning, board development, executive coaching, finding new revenue sources and marketing. Clients include schools, park districts, libraries, artistic groups and charitable organizations.

The clients pay a small fee to cover ESC's costs, but the volunteer consultants are paid nothing. They work in teams on projects that last a minimum of three to six months, and often keep in touch with an organization after a project ends, Van Liew said.

"They usually end up going over and beyond," she said. "Money can't buy that kind of talent."

Arnold Biondo, executive director of Carol Stream Park District, credits ESC consultants with helping the district win two national gold medals for excellence in park and recreation management in the past six years. ESC has worked with the park district on two strategic plans and executive coaching since 1997, he said.

"That really launched into the new era," he said. "All our experiences with them have been good."

One of ESC's current projects is All Saints Catholic Academy in Naperville, where Van Liew has a son enrolled and serves on the school's Strategic Planning Leadership Committee.

Founded by three Naperville parishes in 2005, All Saints represents a new model for the Joliet Diocese in that it serves more than one parish and was the first new Catholic school to open in the diocese in more than 40 years. But after three years of successful operation, school officials felt a strategic plan was needed to map out the next several years, Van Liew said.

ESC was chosen as a consultant after Wheaton Christian Grammar School highly recommended it for strategic planning work it had done there, said Colleen Ryan, chairwoman of All Saints' Strategic Planning Leadership Committee.

Read, a former headmaster, is the team leader for the All Saints project. He and the other ESC consultants have conducted 56 individual interviews since this spring, developed an online survey, pulled together a diagnostic report on the results and facilitated a recent retreat.

Those who attended the retreat rated their satisfaction with it 3.9 on a 4.0 scale, Ryan said.

"I've never heard such glowing comments," she said. "What these people do at ESC is phenomenal."

Read, a 10-year member of ESC, said working with organizations like All Saints is highly satisfying.

"It's a way of keeping our brain cells alive and being with an organization a short time and helping them do better what they do," he said. "It's been a wonderful second career for me."

ESC's volunteer consultants not only use their skills, but have opportunities to expand upon them, Van Liew said. The organization offers ongoing training to members who may not have worked with nonprofits before or are applying their expertise in new ways.

"Not only do they want to give, they love the fact they continue growing," she said. "We call it, the 'I still got it' factor."

One of ESC's newest programs has been to train retirees to serve as interim directors that organizations can hire to fill a temporary leadership gap. Often, the interim directors are able to put the organization on firmer footing for the future, Van Liew said.

"A lot of these nonprofits are in crisis," she said.

Given the challenging economic climate of the times, Van Liew sees even greater opportunities for ESC to help struggling nonprofits.

"ESC's opportunity to help these nonprofits in this time of crisis is more acute than it ever has been," she said. "Donors want greater accountability."

To some that might seem daunting, but Van Liew is excited about the possibilities of what can be accomplished during her three-year term as chairman.

"I want to make ESC more relevant to the Chicago nonprofit community," she said. "I can't wait for the next three years."

On the home front

ESC may be a step up from her past community activities, but Van Liew said volunteer work has always been part of her life. Her parents set the example when she was growing up in Des Moines, Iowa, she said.

"I never knew anything different," she said.

Van Liew said she wants to demonstrate to her own children that they can have successful careers, without shortchanging family or community service. A supportive husband and new technology helps, she said.

Her 2-year-old daughter has learned to answer the phone because she knows mom is calling. Her husband, John Boytim, a contractor, is able to get to activities Van Liew can't attend.

With two sons, ages 11 and 14, Van Liew herself has been active with Boy Scouts as well as with the schools her sons attend. She also serves with music liturgy at St. Thomas the Apostle Church in Naperville and formerly served on its finance committee.

"The only thing that gives is sleep," she said. "I figure I'll have many, many times to sleep later on."

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