

QUINTESSENTIAL PEOPLE

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TENACIOUS

VISIONARY

# The TRIUMPH of Intelligent Generosity

Rebecca Snyders Darr is a social services CEO of acknowledged ability. She came to lead WINGS as a protector of abused families. She is the woman her mother and grandmother knew she'd be.

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BY DAVID RUTTER

PHOTOGRAPHY BY THOMAS BALSAMO

REBECCA SNYDERS DARR is famous, but don't tell her. She'd be embarrassed and even miffed.

Fame can be a natural result of paying attention and figuring out life. Sometime and someplace, life all made sense to her. She had to learn that.

Like when she was 5 and trying to save the life of an angry bee that had fallen into her campout Kool-Aid. The bee ignored her good-intentioned rescue and stung her. Or when she was 13 and disaster struck her family's Alton, Illinois home. A lightning bolt sizzled the home, ignited an inferno, and burned the home to the ground. The Snyders family and four siblings lost everything and were homeless.

"I remember that bee as if it were yesterday. I think the bee taught me that you can't save everyone because not everyone is ready to be saved," she says now. "The lightning taught me humility because the family had to split up for a while. Friends took some of us, and relatives put up some of us. I learned we are in this together."

The Snyders endured and survived. Rebecca grew to become a brilliant young scholar. They taught her the power of generosity and community. Rebecca took it in.

"I grew up watching my Grandma take care of everybody in a small town," she has said, "and my mother giving the coat off her back to someone in need."

To the extent that anyone is transparently the product of personal experience, Rebecca Darr is the culmination of that life. She's CEO of an Illinois social service behemoth. It's an agency that has saved thousands of mothers, children, and their families from abuse and danger. She has helped build doorways into a better life.

Rebecca Darr has spent her professional life stitching wounds and heartaches. She was a brilliant 1990 bachelor of science graduate from the University of Illinois' school of psychology. The school honored her in 2018 with the Liberal Arts & Sciences Alumni Achievement Award.

People have noticed what she's doing, but don't tell her that. It embarrasses her to be noticed.

She is riding on a quest to save families and make humanity more human. "It is always about them," she says. "But you can't think you'll just save one at a time. God doesn't allow that."

First as executive director in 1999 and then for a decade as CEO, she has transformed WINGS. The organization had existed for 15 years before she returned from California clinical work in child counseling. She met Rita Canning who recommended her to be the executive director and the Board hired her to grow the organization.



In those days, WINGS had a staff of eight and assets of \$600,000. No major shelter. Now the staff is 108 and the assets are \$22 million.

Atop this life-saving, life-changing interventional pyramid, Darr is a 21st century master of many arts and renown social activist, all the result of her life's choices. She also is a fabulous Hoffman Estates mom of four sons (Sam, twins Ben and Luke, plus Marshawn who chose to stay with the Darrs so he could graduate high school and be enrolled in college. "He's the fourth brother," she says).

She's a devoted spouse to engineer Joe Darr, her Alton high school sweetheart and fellow U of I alum. "I would not have discovered 'The Grateful Dead' without him and he has supported me in everything I have accomplished," she says.

In the halls of the Illinois State Capitol, she is a constant denizen and famous for her powers of persuasion and for delivering hefty bags of her family's "Pioneer Karmel Korn (kettle corn)" to give away. Her parents unveiled the confection at their State Fair booth, situated just between the Fairground's major political party picnic area..

Her "Popcorn" and reputation are both powerful in Springfield. She has earned credibility all way up to Speaker of the House Mike Madigan. When she reaches out to elected officials, they respond because they know that she delivers on her good intentions.

In 2014, when the Ray Rice incident hit the news, Chicago Bears owner, George McCaskey, reached out to Darr. They wanted to do something about domestic violence in the Chicago region and they gave \$200,000 to pay for the playground and operations at WINGS new Safe House in the City of Chicago. The Bears put their money "where its mouth was" against domestic violence.

When Chicago Mayor Rahm Emanuel plucked \$1.8 million from a strip club lawsuit, he wanted her and no one else to take the cash and build a fully staffed shelter on Chicago's South Side. "Not everyone at WINGS wanted to do that project, but you can't turn down the Mayor and \$1.8 million," she says.

But to build that shelter, she had to raise \$9 million more for the infrastructure and operational costs. "People sort of have a misunderstanding about the money it takes to run WINGS," she notes. "It takes about \$1 million a year to run each of the large Safe Houses. People think the government takes care of all that. It doesn't. That's what we do."

The major Safe Houses, profitable resale shops, and a biggest-in-Illinois network of 60 homes and apartments keep abused spouses and their children

safe while they rebuild their lives and recover financially.

But there is capital money in Springfield cubbyholes, all hidden in locked bureau drawers, stuffed under the bed, snuggled inside obscure financial accounts. Darr pursues the cash, and she convinces government officials to share it before they get voted out, and the cash disappears.

Fundraising is a CEO art. Saving people effectively can be a major industry that requires ingenuity, as well as heart.

Sitting still to talk about herself is not her strong suit. But she is sitting still to talk this afternoon because Palatine-based WINGS is celebrating its 35th anniversary. She wants people to know WINGS is a mighty force for proven good and worth their contributions. She's shaped and grown that force.

More than offering safety, WINGS teaches self-sufficiency, self-esteem, and self-direction.

Every nine seconds an American woman is beaten, usually behind closed doors by a domestic partner. "Our job is to take care of people and get them from a bad place to a good place." She has a long list of personal heroes inside WINGS and its graduate family to inspire the hardest hearts.

But it's been a good day. She's turned 52 today. Even better than a routine happy birthday present, the State of Illinois check has arrived. It's \$500,000. She just got the confirmation email. Been working on getting that check from state officials for a year.


The check translates into saved lives. "I want to wave it around to show all the people who thought we couldn't get it," she announces.

But she is immediately embarrassed for taking transitory joy because

she believes—adamantly insists—that the satisfaction belongs to everyone on her team from the senior leaders, to counseling staff, to housekeepers. She intuitively turns the light elsewhere, away from herself. Besides, WINGS packs its' own outward-aimed illumination with its tagline, "Breaking the Cycle of Domestic Violence".

Darr hopes one day to take WINGS national, especially to Los Angeles to build "Nicole's House". She first befriended Denise Brown, the sister of Nicole Brown Simpson, in San Francisco while Darr was healing troubled young souls in Silicon Valley. They have started to make plans for the shelter.

WINGS also has an impressive success rate, because more than 94 percent of those who've found an oasis in their safe houses—participants now in the thousands—do not return to the abuser.

Such competence nurtures fame, but Darr is not in the fame business, as if Wonder Woman without the uniform wouldn't be Wonder Woman. In her view, she is only following the spiritual pathway of great life models—her Mom, Barbara Becker Snyders, and Grandmother Josephine Becker. They were strong, selfless heroes, and they taught her the triumphant value of generosity. She paid attention and it has paid off. 

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*David Rutter's career spans 45 years as publisher, editor, writer and columnist at six daily newspapers in five states. He wrote columns for the Chicago Tribune's suburban newspapers and won Chicago's Lisagor Award for editorial writing. He has written three books, and teaches personal memoir writing at the region's community centers and libraries. Rutter lives in Lake Villa. He can be reached at david.rutter@live.com or 847-445-7684.*

## HERE ARE SOME WORDS THAT OTHERS SHARED ABOUT REBECCA DARR.

### Matt Baumann, COLLEAGUE

I'm the president of the Board of Directors for WINGS since January 2015. Before that, I served on the board as their Treasurer/Secretary for two years. I originally met Rebecca in 2004 when I overheard a conversation in my office about a nonprofit needing help finding a new office location. I asked to be introduced to Rebecca at that time and the rest, as they say, is history.

I've been fortunate to meet many compelling, influential leaders over the years, but none more so than Rebecca. Her passion for WINGS' mission is infectious and her dedication to the survivors of domestic violence is inspirational to everyone she meets. Her tireless advocacy for DV awareness has helped WINGS grow from a small, local suburban nonprofit to Illinois' unmatched leader in housing and support services for the men, women, and children affected by domestic violence.

Rebecca's enthusiasm for her work is unmatched and her name has become synonymous with WINGS. She is confident. There are few who can command a stage and microphone like Rebecca. Her confidence helps inspire confidence in others. Under Rebecca's leadership, I've watched countless examples of our courageous survivors transform from mere shells of themselves into confident, strong, vocal leaders willing to share their own stories to help others.

### Anna Brown, FRIEND

I am both extremely happy and honored to be able to write about my friend, Rebecca Darr. I met Rebecca, almost 12 years ago, through an introduction from Rita Canning. Rita introduced me to WINGS and Rebecca. I have served on the Northwest WINGS Advisory Board for 10 years. Never have I met anyone in her position with as much TIRELESS PASSION for her job and its mission. The constant growth, in numbers of women, men, and children who are helped and served by WINGS each year doesn't tell the whole story of how much impact Rebecca has had on the life of each and every person behind those numbers.

She wears many hats and wears them to perfection. On any given day she could be sitting with a child who just needs a smile, driving to Springfield to fight for money and/or legislation that would be favorable to WINGS, meeting with current and potential donors, and then stopping by one of the WINGS resale shops to purchase an outfit to wear to a WINGS event and then heading home to her family. Each and every one of the people she sees and comes in contact with each and every day is blessed with her genuine interest in them.

Unfortunately, the need for shelters and help for battered and abused women, children, and men has grown. Thankfully, Rebecca is there to answer the call and to champion those who don't have a voice. The shelter in Chicago

is another example of how she can use her influence to rally politicians, philanthropists, and the community to help those in need. I am sure that she would tell you that she would gladly be out of a job, if that meant there was no need for any of WINGS services. Rebecca also makes time to support her friends who are involved in other charities. She will often show up in support of them at their events.

I am blessed to know Rebecca. Her unwavering dedication and passion for WINGS rubs off on those who know her, and we are all better for it.



*"Rita Canning has been my mentor and advocate for the entire 20 years I have been at WINGS." –Rebecca Darr*

**Rita Canning, COLLEAGUE**

I have worked with Rebecca for 20 years in her capacity as executive director of WINGS. I was president then chairman of WINGS during that time. In 1999, a friend of mine suggested I meet Rebecca at a time when WINGS was looking for new leadership. Needless to say, I had no idea the future of WINGS would dramatically change as a result of that meeting. The growth of WINGS has been astounding. Rebecca has attracted a committed Board of Directors who have brought additional financial resources and new connections for WINGS.

Under her leadership, we went from a very small organization to the largest provider of domestic violence services in the state of Illinois. Our relationship turned into an incredible partnership. I was able to open doors and Rebecca instinctively knew what to do. Rebecca is well-known for her acts of kindness both in and outside of WINGS. She is a visionary with boundless energy and extraordinary interpersonal skills. Everyone immediately loved Rebecca and wanted to help our mission to be a success. She has a warmth about her that draws in people. Rebecca views everyone involved with WINGS, whether they are staff, donors, or volunteers, as part of the "WINGS family".

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Rita Canning and Rebecca Darr

**Fred Crespo, STATE REPRESENTATIVE, ASSISTANT HOUSE MAJORITY LEADER, 44TH DISTRICT**

I met Rebecca 14 years ago. I had just been elected and remember meeting in my office to talk about her work. I was immediately impressed by how passionate and committed she was to her advocacy. Since that initial meeting I have met a number of executive directors at agencies and nonprofits and Rebecca Darr is truly the gold standard of leadership. Her ability to communicate and educate others on the issue has allowed her to bring in the resources and support needed to take the organization to where it is today.

Rebecca has taught me the role that passion plays in achieving one's goals. She has channeled her passion into solidifying WINGS as an integral part of our community, empowering women to take back control of their lives. She is everywhere. She even gets to the Capitol before I do. I once remember running into her at a local car wash and seeing her work on her laptop while her car was being washed. When Rebecca sets her mind on something, she follows through until it's accomplished, even if the car is in desperate of a rinse and shine.

**Joe Darr, HUSBAND**

Rebecca and I are friends and co-conspirators since the 9th grade, married for 28 years.

Rebecca is full of courage and is a beacon of hope to all who know her. She only makes big plans and is never afraid to take on what others assume is not possible. She also has the insight, tenacity, and patience to work long-term strategies and achieve desired outcomes, when others do not see a clear path to get there. Rebecca often deals with the gritty and tragic parts of life, but she never gets despaired. She never refuses a request for help, support, or collaboration.

Rebecca often wears a necklace that was given to her many decades ago by her first clinical supervisor. It is an abstract representation of the Greek Goddess Artemis—the protector of women and children. Nothing could be more apropos for her.

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**I have met a number of executive directors at agencies and nonprofits and Rebecca Darr is truly the gold standard of leadership.**  
**—Fred Crespo, State Representative, Assistant House Majority Leader, 44th District**

**Diane Hill, FRIEND**

Rebecca has the ability to engage and inspire caring people to invest in a cause that truly changes lives. I first met Rebecca through a story told by my late husband David K. Hill, owner of Kimball Hill Homes. Rebecca and Rita Canning, representing WINGS, made a visit to his office to present the case for the great need to build a safe house to provide emergency shelter for victims of domestic violence and their children. The story Rebecca shared was so compelling that David agreed to assist and subsequently helped engage many industry leaders to help make the safe house become a reality.

Ever since hearing the story of women in need, my family and I have remained steadfast supporters of WINGS. The safe house really helped mobilize the broader community in supporting WINGS. Rebecca is also visionary and has been able to promote growth in program support, build a second safe house in the city, and expand circles of influence. Rebecca clearly presents an example of how powerful story telling can promote significant change.

**Ellaine Sambo-Reyther, COLLEAGUE**

I met Rebecca in 2008 while having lunch with her and Rita Canning. I have been on the WINGS Board of Directors since 2010, and am current acting secretary. Rebecca is one of the most passionate people I know. She is a leader in the mission. If you stop and think about the degree of emotion involved in her day-to-day, it takes someone with great passion, compassion, determination, character, and strength to carry and continue to build and fulfill the mission of WINGS.

In any given situation, she teaches many, and has taught me to hold my head up high, and no matter the situation, never give up. No one is ever alone, and Rebecca and the WINGS' family of staff and supporters have proven that. The many graduates of the WINGS program are true testaments of this, and come to learn that with Rebecca's leadership, and with WINGS, if your mind, focus, and heart are in it, there is a life that is full of blessings and incredible things for your taking.

Publisher's Note: Quintessential People™ is a heartfelt collaboration between our publication and portrait artist Thomas Balsamo. Our goal is to share exceptional images and words that ring true about some of the finest, most inspiring people in our community. For more information, contact QB at publisher@qbarrington.com, or Thomas Balsamo (Portraits By Thomas) at 847-381-7710, or visit www.portraitsbythomas.com.



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