

**May 26th, 2014**

Dear Woman of Influence Selection Committee:

I am thrilled to have the opportunity to get to know Melissa Clarke-Wharff and would like to share why her vision and tenacity are worthy of community-wide recognition as a Woman of Influence.

In the face of family health issues she had the vision to see the need in our greater metro community, and created the Courage League Sports facility. There are more than 30,000 children in the metro area with special needs. Most people with healthy children have no idea how isolating special needs of any kind are for families and their children in all areas of life. Courage League Sports, with its mission of "Every Child Deserves to Play," is quickly becoming a place of joy for special needs kids and their families, as children play, move their bodies and feel safe in an environment that is tailored to their mental and physical needs.

Allow me to share with you how this facility is impacting my family directly. Our daughter Margaret became acquainted with the Courage League in February of this year. She had spent nearly 3 years sitting on the couch in our home with nowhere to go that was appropriate for her mentally and physically due to a catastrophic seizure disorder. Once she became aware of what this facility offered, she now wants to spend a part of every day there with Melissa and her staff. She is doing yoga, playing tennis, volleyball, basketball, EXERGAMING, soccer, kickball, baseball; exercising on an adaptive bike and stretching and dancing! I cannot tell you the change in my daughter's mood and physical health. It is short of miraculous. This all occurs in a wonderful facility where she is treated as a person and not stared at or looked down upon.

Melissa is reaching out to families throughout Central Iowa and providing positive ways for special needs children and adults to interact with one another. Just recently, she began offering a morning class once a month for the Friendship Club of West Des Moines Human Services. This group is a social opportunity for special needs adults who all have little opportunity for interaction. There are multiple programs and times for different groups. One that Margaret also enjoys is Tuesday afternoon when there is a time allotted for a group of female adults that can come and play.

Courage League Sports is the result of the passion of Melissa for her son Jack. She knew if she built it, they would come. Very few people advocate for the disabled as she has, because as parents we are weary of the daily

care taking our children require. Her energy to make an idea and this facility come to life for children and adults is above and beyond what most people are capable of doing. Her influence is far reaching and perhaps beyond what she had in mind in the beginning. She has truly changed our life for the better by making her vision a reality for so many to have a **Place to Play**. Margaret will benefit for the rest of her life from Melissa's passion. The Courage League Sport's motto **Every Child Deserves to Play** tells the story in five very simple words. And, she is visionary enough to see that there is a child in everyone, no matter what the age, and adults with physical and mental challenges are also included. She is a role model to all of us as she loves and encourages people that may be thought of in our society as the least valuable. She brings joy and acceptance to everyone that walks into Courage League Sports. I am in awe of Melissa Clarke-Wharff.

Sincerely,

Sally Gaer