May 29, 2014

The Selection Committee for

The Women of Influence Award

**RE: Melissa Clarke-Wharff**

Dear Committee,

Melissa Clarke-Wharff is a force to be reckoned with. And, I mean that in the nicest possible way. Having known her for more than 5 years, she has never once backed down from what she believes is right. Fortunately for central Iowa what she believes is right is that every child deserves to play. Inspired by her son, Jack, and backed by a family equally committed to this vision, she has spent the last two years working to make that belief a reality. The result is Courage League Sports, an adaptive sports facility for children and adults with special needs. This facility provides a space for children and young adults who can't go "full" speed for any reason--cognitive, physical and emotional.

As a physician, I know the important benefits of Courage League Sports to the special needs community are many fold. For children and adults with special health care needs it provides them a place to practice and expand on their therapy skills in a non-threatening environment and in such a fun way they often don't realize they are doing it. If children graduate from physical and /or occupational therapy, Courage League Sports provides them with a place to maintain or even continue to make gains as they participate in the activities available. Courage League Sports provides the space and the means for people with special health care needs to improve their cardiovascular fitness and have fun doing it.

In addition, the social benefits are just as important. This special place provides children and adults with special needs a place where they can meet others with similar struggles. Learning new skills and having a sense of accomplishment boosts their self-esteem as they can be a part of a team and play sports just like their able-bodied siblings. This also come with all the accompanying benefits--team building skills, developing trust, sportsmanship and forging lifelong friendships. Parents benefit from networking with other parents going through the similar challenges. Courage League Sports has the ability to not just improve the quality of life for the population it serves but to transform their lives and those around them--from family to volunteers to the community.

Melissa Clarke Wharff’s vision, drive and determination has brought this trailblazing nonprofit to our community and is changing the lives of many children, adults and families here in our community. She faced a challenging personal situation face on and has made a difference for many. She is a woman of influence – as she took her idea and then made it a reality by working with community leaders, fundraising and working incredibly hard. She truly deserves this recognition.

Sincerely,

Heidi Shrek, M.D., Pediatrician

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