



Christina Potts joined the LISTEN Center as executive director in 2018.
Eric Hylden /
Grand Forks Herald

Listen's Christy Potts knew she wanted to make a difference to those with disabilities

BY KEVIN FEE

Grand Forks Herald
 GRAND FORKS –

Christy Potts has worked with many people with disabilities. What keeps her coming back to her job as executive director at the LISTEN Center are stories like this:

She was supporting a client, Gerald, who was 62 years old. He was an orphan at birth. Potts made calls and internet

searches to try to find his family. Bingo. Letters she sent resulted in a response.

"I got a response back and it was Gerald's sisters. He had three living sisters, and they all came to visit him, and everyone cried. Gerald's eyes got watery, and you could see the joy on his face during that interaction. His sisters had just lost their other brother and fate had sent them Gerald. I get

emotional thinking about the experience."

Potts runs LISTEN, which provides home- and community-based services. It is Medicaid-funded through the state of North Dakota, providing residential support for people living in their own apartments or homes, family support services for children and adults still living with their families and day services for adults.

The Herald sat down with Potts to discuss her organization's mission and her leadership role.

Q: What got you into this business? Tell us how it started.

A: I grew up on a farm north of Bismarck and a mile down the road from my grandparents. I have two uncles with developmental disabilities who were a big part of my life. Growing up

they were always at my grandparents' house, along with my other aunts, uncles, cousins, so it was a very familiar experience for me being around my uncles, Donny and Doug. They had a different way of moving through the world than my other family members. During this time, respect, advocacy and a high level of care was demonstrated for me by my family, especially from

my grandparents who were their biggest champions.

This experience had a great impact on me and helped form how I interact with, not only people with disabilities, but with everyone. In 2007, my husband accepted a job at Polar Communications in Park River, so that moved us to this area of the state. At that time, I decided to finish my undergraduate degree in



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business management and international business by taking online classes. When we first moved,

I worked at Marvin Windows in Grafton. But in August 2008, my father was diagnosed with brain

cancer, so I was fortunate to be able to move back to Bismarck to spend time with him. He passed in

February 2009 at 47 years old. He was the one who encouraged me to go into business and management. He would tell me, "You get a degree in business, and you can work just about anywhere." I was 24 at the time and he passed 11 days before my husband and I were married, so that was a really hard time in my life.

I pressed on, continuing my online classes and I started working directly with people with disabilities in July 2009 after I had moved back to Grafton. I had never worked with people with disabilities as a job before, but it felt comfortable immediately.

Q: Are there any hurdles or stereotypes that you had to overcome due to gender?

A: I have definitely run into many hurdles and stereotypes as a woman. One of the biggest ones being that what I say holds less value than what a male says at times. I've

had situations where I thank male colleagues for what they have said during meetings, and their response is, "I said exactly what you said." And I say, "I know, but thank you for saying it, too."

There's been other situations where individuals come into meetings with me or want me to conduct business in a certain way, so they'll try to direct me in our business dealings together because, I think, they think I don't know what I'm doing. I'll navigate those situations by asking a lot of questions and even though I know what will be best for LISTEN or I know what the legality of a situation is, if they start to be really persistent with me, I'll tell them that I just don't know enough about the situation to make a decision and I need to contact our attorney or another professional and get back to them.

Usually when I say attorney, people back off.

Q: What has been your biggest joy as a woman business leader?

A: My biggest joy is the opportunity to build up other people's confidence in their jobs and lives. I have a great responsibility to the staff who choose to work for LISTEN and part of that responsibility is to show them respect and love and opportunities for growth. Whatever they want for themselves, that's what I want for them. I want to lead them with respect and fairness so that they can lead and support people with disabilities with respect and fairness. That's another great joy, having an interaction with an employee where you were able to show a lot of grace and learning and then seeing that employee reframe their interactions with others to show the same care.

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Q: What advice would you give to young women who want to become executives or entrepreneurs?

A: Keep your eye out for the things that look exciting – and also a little scary – and then find a way

to do them. I keep finding that the more I reach for opportunities that feel too big or too far out of my comfort zone, the more I look back and say 'I'm really glad I did that.'

Q: Are there any hurdles or stereotypes that

you had to overcome due to gender?

A: I don't know that I would say obstacles related to gender specifically – at least not that I've felt. I think in this business – or maybe in any business – having to get over your

own mental hurdle is a challenge. There's always this fear of failure, rejection or people just not liking you, and that's OK. Getting to a point where you feel good about what you're doing and the way you're doing it, and knowing that the right people are going to gravitate toward that is important.

Q: As for being a business leader: Knowing what you know now, would you do things the exact same way? If so, why? And if not, what would you change?

A: I think all I would have changed, knowing what I know now, is that I should have done it sooner. I really enjoy getting to work one-on-one with people, and do work that's catered to them. It feels impactful and can make a difference in the course of their lives.

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Q: Do you have advice for young women who want to become executives or entrepreneurs?

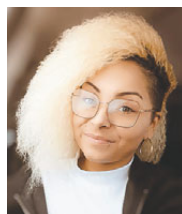
A: My advice is to be open to reframing the way you think about things and be flexible in the way you reach your goals. Things will never work out exactly the way you plan, but sometimes we get caught up in the details and something happens that makes us think it won't work. But, if you are persistent, most of the time you can make something work. Also, being very forward-thinking will help you to reach your goals.

Q: As for being a business leader: Knowing what you know now, would you do things the exact same way? If so, why? And if not, what would you change?

A: I would change the way I did some things because every day is an opportunity to learn and grow. I spent a lot of time in my 20s giving people the benefit of the doubt and what that looked like was that I didn't document interactions or agreements. One thing I would have changed is to follow up conversations with an email. I've always figured out a way to get things done, but by doing that, I would have been able to make progress faster earlier in my career. When we're young, we might feel like we need to be really nice to our colleagues and leaders and trust them to follow through on things or pass information on, but you're not being unkind by following up with an email, so it's documented. You are more efficient at your job when you do that. You can then forward that email and add on to it for the next interaction.

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