

Nomination for Robin Harkonen

Woman of the Year

Laurentian Chamber of Commerce

Virginia, MN

Executive Director, boss, co-worker, mentor, passionate advocate, wife, mother, grandmother, community volunteer, and friend are words that do not do justice on their own to describe our nominee for woman of the year, but put them all together and you begin to get a picture of Robin Harkonen.

Robin Harkonen is the Executive Director of the East Range DAC, a job she accepted 3 ½ years ago after the retirement of the previous long time director. ERDAC is a program providing employment training and opportunities to over 90 individuals who have disabilities from across the Range, and employs 21 Staff. It is licensed by the state of Minnesota, services administered by St. Louis County. Robin has developed close relationships with our clients and their families over the 30 years she has been employed at ERDAC. She is always willing to go above and beyond to support them as they navigate the often complicated disability services system.

This very challenging year, has left us at ERDAC grateful that Robin was able to step up over and over to handle the never ending Covid-related challenges. During the past year we had to close our doors to both staff and clients for a period of time. Every step of what our governor has called turning back the dial meant adding new policies and procedures (and they continue to change), in order to first bring back staff, and then, in stages as allowed, some of our clients. She has taken the lead in finding and applying for funds and grants that kept our program alive and kept staff jobs. Robin isn't only worried about our agency, she takes many calls from others - finding ways to connect people with resources or with each other, so that we can all stay in business.

She is a strong voice and a strong advocate for people with disabilities whose lives have seen limitations and changes during the pandemic. In order for our program to remain open and stay safe, we have watched her respond to each new challenge; gathering as much information as she can get, looking at options, making good decisions, and making it possible to move forward and weather the uncertainties by working together.

Robin is an active community volunteer, often found with her family members volunteering at fundraisers or with the United Way Buddy Back Pack program. As the Executive Director, Robin places high priority on partnerships with other community resources such as the Disabled American Veterans. Both of our agencies collect used clothing in bins. We are able to pass some of the usable clothing collected in ERDAC's bin to them. Robin and her family volunteer along with some DAC staff in helping the DAV periodically load a semi with clothing they collect. Robin fosters ERDAC's partnerships with other agencies who distribute clothing, including winter coats, to those in need in our communities and with donations we make of gift baskets or hand crafted items to local fundraisers. She serves on the Board of Directors of the Minnesota Discovery Center and Care Partners. She believes firmly that ERDAC plays an important role as a community resource, business, and employer.

Robin's leadership has been recognized and appreciated by MOHR the (Minnesota Organization for Habilitation and Rehabilitation), the trade group representing programs similar to ERDAC throughout Minnesota. Robin serves as Regional Representative for MOHR, and was elected the Vice President of the state organization. This has given her the opportunity to share the voice of rural programs, especially those in Northeastern Minnesota, at MOHR meetings, as well as with agencies such as the Minnesota Department of Human Services, Minnesota Department of Health, with legislators and legislative committees.

It is not in Robin's nature to be the loudest voice in the room, nor the one who presumes to know it all- but with her attention to detail, her passion for her purpose, and her generosity of spirit she has earned a great deal of respect and is often called upon when information or a perspective is needed.

We are nominating Robin as Woman of the Year as we have watched her face challenges, develop new skills in real time while responding to them then building networks to join with others who are sharing these same challenges. She is generous in offering assistance, helping people to connect with resources, and works tirelessly on behalf of ERDAC, our clients, and staff.

In rural communities we often find the best way to do our best is by helping each other. We think that leadership is not only about the individual leader, but how that leader has a positive impact on others helping to facilitate and give confidence to others so they too can grow. As a leader, her impact is felt beyond East Range DAC and our staff and clients. She impacts the community organizations she supports as a board member and volunteer. She makes sure no one in St. Paul one forgets about Northeastern Minnesota. For the reasons we highlighted above and so many more, we nominate Robin Harkonen as Woman of the Year.