

Rachael D. DeSpain

Director: Tri-Counties Opportunity Council Early Head Start/Head Start Program

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Mrs. DeSpain was born and raised in Mount Carroll, Illinois. Prior to college, she was a three-sport athlete competing in volleyball, basketball, and track. After high school graduation, Mrs. DeSpain attended Northern Illinois University, Monmouth College and Ashford University, attaining an undergraduate degree in Organizational Management and earned a master's degree in organizational management with a specialization in leadership. In college, Mrs. DeSpain welcomed a baby boy, Keegan, to the world. As a single mother still attending college, Mrs. DeSpain became an employee of Tri-County Opportunities Council as an assistant teacher. With help from the parents she adores, Mrs. DeSpain was able to work two fulltime jobs while completing her undergrad and graduate degrees.

Upon completing two years as a teacher assistant, Mrs. DeSpain became the lead teacher of her classroom serving 18 children. At this point in her life, Mrs. DeSpain truly began to comprehend the reality of poverty and trauma in her community. In 2010, Tri-County Opportunities Council was granted funding to expand, providing Early Head Start services, creating a Supervisor position Mrs. DeSpain accepted. This role required development of additional policies and procedures for a new population to the program, a task neatly aligned with her educational background. Understanding the importance families play in the successful development of their children, Mrs. DeSpain was offered and took on the role of Family and Community Service Manager in October 2012. Leading the family service component for the program, she focused on building strength-based relationships, identifying barriers, and connecting families to community resources. A primary responsibility was overseeing and strengthening the eligibility, recruitment, selection, enrollment and attendance (ERSEA) procedures. Mrs. DeSpain briefly left Tri-County Opportunities Council when an opening presented itself in the private sector to create a summer development program for children ages 5 to 13 at a 77-acre complex. While successful in her role she found a great need to return to Tri-County Opportunities Council, providing a voice for and empowering the underserved population as Director when the opportunity arose. For almost two years, over half of which was overshadowed by a global pandemic she has remained focused on disrupting poverty through educating children, empowering families, and strengthening communities. In this role Mrs. DeSpain oversees services in 9 northwestern Illinois Counties, serving 633 children and families leading over 175 staff members.

Ms. DeSpain presently resides in Albany, Illinois with her husband, three children and beloved giant schnauzer Walter.