

Stewart Abrams Helps St. Jude Improve Quality of Life for Young Patients

Chara Stewart Abrams wanted to work in healthcare so she could help “make the world a better place for those with few opportunities and no viable voice.” But she also knew she didn’t want to work on the side of healthcare that dealt with blood and broken bones. The middle ground was working in public health and eventually moving in healthcare administration, where she finds



herself today as the administrative director of the department of psychology at St. Jude Children’s Research Hospital in Memphis, TN. “I oversee the operational leadership of the department, including business and research. This allows our researchers and staff to focus on what’s important: to cure cancer and create a better quality of life for patients,” says Stewart Abrams, who has a master’s degree in public health.

With the organization for seven years, Stewart Abrams has played a vital role in building the department’s infrastructure and establishing its foundational policies and procedures; the department had only been in existence for a year when she took the role. While she’s led a variety of projects, one of the most impactful has been the conversion of the department’s paper-based mental health records to electronic records. “This is very important to have in this day and age,” she says.

“To give an idea how huge the project was, the vendor converted 1.5 million sheets of paper, front and back, to the new electronic health record repository. The project was successful because I work with a great team that invested in the success of the process. It took almost two years to complete and stabilize the project, and our clinical administrative staff now maintains it.” It was the mission of St. Jude as a leading children’s hospital pioneering research and treatments for children with cancer and other life-threatening diseases that brought Stewart Abrams to the organization. “What drew me was the ability to work in a place where you’re working with faculty and employees who want to provide patients with the best care, regardless of their ability to pay,” she points out.

She also appreciates how St. Jude values its employees who work hard to serve their patients. “St. Jude values its employees and their contributions, regardless of position or role. This is demonstrated by the way leadership listens to employees. Employees here are encouraged to identify areas of improvement and be part of the solution.” For young professionals seeking to work in healthcare administration, Stewart Abrams recommends applying for an administrative fellowship after completing a master’s degree. “This puts you in a healthcare environment and gives you the experiences you need to figure out where it is in the

hospital you want to be, such as nursing administration, IT, support services. Whatever role you want to play, fellowships give you the opportunity to learn and experience the field.”

She also recommends joining a professional membership organization that serves the industry; Stewart Abrams herself is president of the Memphis chapter of the National Association of Health Services Executives (NAHSE), a professional organization for minority healthcare executives. Another option is the American College of Healthcare Executives (ACHE). “These groups provide a network of people in your field in which you can build relationships and participate in professional development opportunities. As an early careerist in the healthcare field, it’s important to build strong relationships, get to know people and what they do, maybe even find a mentor or sponsor to help you with the trajectory of your career,” she advises.