



# LAURA HOPE WHITAKER

*CEO, SPEAKER*

[laurahopewhitaker.com](http://laurahopewhitaker.com)



## About Laura Whitaker

Laura Hope Whitaker, M. Ed., began her relationship with Extra Special People, Inc. by working as a counselor and, subsequently, a leadership team member in 2003. With her passion for enhancing the lives of children with developmental disabilities and her specialized education in this field, Laura was selected as the director after the founder, Martha Wyllie's sudden passing in 2004. She has found her dream job with ESP - or as she says, her dream job found her. As CEO, Laura uses her faith along with her leadership and management strengths to manage staff, oversee multiple year-round programs and raise funds to run programs. Her favorite part of the job is getting to hug the many children who walk through the ESP doors.

Laura obtained both her Bachelor's degree in Collaborative Special Education and her Master's degree in Adapted Curriculum Classic Autism at the University of Georgia. She and her family are active members at Athens Church and Classic City Church. Laura's most important roles include wife to husband Joseph and mother to Owen Patrick, Finley Gray, and Tate Alan.

## Why Laura?

- At the age of 19, Laura took over as executive director raising \$50,000 in just months. Since then, she has established ESP as the leader in the diversity, equity, inclusion and belonging arena, alongside 9.2 million other American women in the nonprofit world, which is the third largest workforce in the USA. ESP has gone through dramatic growth and restoration, striving to provide more children & their families transformative experiences, changing communities for the better.
- Featured on NBC nightly news, Laura shared about the ESP Miracle League, a fully accessible baseball field along with a universally designed "Playground of Possibilities", providing inclusive play for people of all abilities, planting seeds of dreaming big for those that may not have the ability to see the dreams for themselves.
- In 2019, Laura was chosen to present on the TedX stage, sharing on the Dandelion Shift; and how to see difference as ability, not disability.
- Executive Director for more than 18 years, now CEO, Laura uses her faith along with her leadership to manage a team in 3 cities, overseeing multiple year-round recreational programs, employing adults with disabilities through ESP's employment program Java Joy and raising funds to run these programs that serve over 900 families in Georgia. Laura was previously involved with LEAD Athens, the Leadership Georgia program, served on the State Board of Behavioral Health and Developmental Disabilities, was awarded the 2021 Athena Award, recipient of the 2023 Georgia Titan 100 award, and currently serves on the Oconee State Bank Board of Directors.

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# EXTRA SPECIAL PEOPLE

CHANGING COMMUNITIES FOR THE BETTER

[espyouandme.org](http://espyouandme.org)



## About Extra Special People

ESP exists to create transformative experiences for people with disabilities and their families, changing communities for the better. ESP envisions a world where every person, of every ability, in every community has universal access to transformative experiences. With locations in Athens, Rome and Atlanta, Georgia, year-round programming and family support through ESP 360 and additional programs like employment for people with disabilities through Java Joy and transformative summer camp experiences through Hooray, ESP provides a community for those often left out.

## What makes ESP special?

- The community of ESP consists of 1,000+ participants, 2,700+ volunteers, 75 community events and 60+ sponsors.
- Big Hearts, the most heart-warming weekend in Georgia, consists of an in-person family-friendly talent show in Athens, Georgia at Athens Church and a black tie gala and silent auction at The Classic Center in Downtown Athens. These Big Hearts events allow people to come together to celebrate people with disabilities while raising yearly funds for their favorite ESP programs.
- From the ESP 360 afternoon programs, each individual will get the chance to learn, develop, and refine skills that will help them build confidence, friendships, and independence to Java Joy, which provides meaningful employment for adults with disabilities while giving the community one-of-a-kind opportunities for engagement and Hooray, ESP's Summer Camp signature brand, currently runs eight weeks of camp, including both day and overnight camp in Athens and Rome, Georgia, serving more than 500 participants a season.
- ESP's goal is to create transformative experiences for people with disabilities and their families.

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## Suggested Interview Questions:

- Can you share a bit about your background and what inspired you to become involved in supporting individuals with developmental disabilities?
- ESP is known for its innovative programs. Can you highlight a few programs that you believe have made a substantial difference in the lives of the individuals you serve?
- How does ESP engage with the local community, and what role do partnerships and collaborations play in achieving the organization's goals?
- What is your vision for the future of ESP?
- How can the community get involved and support the mission of ESP? Are there specific needs or opportunities for volunteers?
- Are there any particular success stories or impactful moments from ESP programs that stand out to you?
- Can you share examples of individuals or families who have been particularly touched or transformed by the services and programs provided by ESP?
- How has the vision for ESP evolved since its inception, and what goals do you have for its future?
- You started working at ESP very young, what attracted you to the organization? What has sustained you since?
- You delivered a [TEDx Talk in 2019](#) encouraging listeners to view difference as ability, not disability through a dandelion. Can you tell us more how this metaphor has shaped your approach to disability awareness today?
- How do you balance the hard everyday moments with the overall joy of working at ESP?
- Many ESP volunteers are young adults attending local universities or high schools. How do you practice leadership with this younger generation?
- Can you tell us more about Java Joy and how the program creates meaningful employment?
- As the CEO of a nonprofit, what are the benefits of giving back to the community around you?



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## Suggested Interview Topics:

- Running a Nonprofit that Fosters Inclusivity In The Workplace
- Running a nonprofit like a business
- Ability Awareness | Appreciating differences and advocating for others
- How your organization can implement DEI practices
- ESP's story | How it started, its mission and its path forward
- Connecting the unconnected: Inclusivity goes beyond opening a door
- Everyday Joy | Little moments at ESP that motivate our community
- Thurst into Leadership: Learning and cultivating your leadership style throughout your career
- How to teach our children kindness: finding joy in our differences
- What ESP Means to Mothers + How ESP Has Changed This CEO's View on Parenting
- Being a Friend: Leaning Into The Uncomfortable, being ability aware and inclusive
- Practicing Joy with ESP + Why Differences Matter



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