

Name: Jim Accomando

Position: President, National PTA

1st PTA Position: Volunteer within my son AJ's kindergarten class 19 years ago. I read to his class. The first position with a title was Director of "Art in the Classroom" for grades K-3

Most challenging: Nineteen years ago, I found myself trying to volunteer in a predominately and historically female run Title 1 elementary school PTA. I remember distinctly, it was myself and another man who recently moved to town from Ohio. He had previous PTA experience, I did not. I was the deer in headlights trying to navigate oncoming traffic. My children were 5 years apart so I knew that I would have an 11-year tenure at this school. The school was literally my back-yard neighbor. The kindergarten playground backed up to my fence and I could hear my son's voice at recess. My wife is a second-grade teacher and I used to teach at the secondary school level, so I knew that if I wanted to continue engaging in my child's education and provide support to our Title 1 school community, I needed a game plan.

Overcome an obstacle: I learned what PTA flexible meant from the start. I also learned to listen more than I spoke and to be patient. Both attributes do not come easily to me. I needed to earn the respect of others but most of all, I needed to model the behavior I expected from others. I recruited more Dads to participate, initially in traditional roles such as operating the grill at the spring fair, set-up and take down for events and other stereotypical roles. We began to show up at meetings and eventually even hold office. My friend from Ohio became our first male school President.

As a CubMaster in the same school where the Pack was predominately run by the Dads, I was able to merge activities and events to foster community engagement. In a school of 500 students, there were only four male employees, two teachers, the custodian and the principal. We shared a lot of best practices and strategies in how to foster more male participation and engagement long before I heard that it was a strategy at National PTA. Finally, during my 11th year I was able to be a "Room Mom" for my daughter's 5th grade class....almost. We were the only grade to have co-room parents, one male, one female. We have come a long way since then. Today, as I hear the bells ring and the children's voices echo across my back-yard fence, I know dads are welcomed and valued as partners supporting the PTA Mission and are integral to community and family engagement.

Happiest moment as a PTA leader: I don't think I have ever had an unhappy moment in PTA, but I have sure had more than a few frustrating times. My happiest moments however have all been working directly with children, especially my own and their friends, while making the Mission come alive. I also found great satisfaction in being there for children who did not have representation for a variety of reasons or circumstances and being their voice.

In the earlier grades, your children love to see you and show you off to their friends. It does not matter what the initiative, the fact that you are in their school makes you feel like you have super powers. Middle school they become more self-conscious to see you hosting their dance or chaperoning the Washington DC field trip. Kind of cool but not really. High school forget it. As President of the high school PTA my voice was on the intercom and I was always with the principal and teachers. I think I had the most fun seeing my children duck under a lunch room table or avoid me whenever possible. It became a high stakes game of how I could catch them off guard. Oh, the little joys and pleasures that come with this job.

My most satisfying and Mission focused moment was to lead our CT State PTA through one of our most trying times following the tragedy at Sandy Hook. We were able to mobilize an army of volunteers

in creating a winter wonderland of snowflakes within their new school and town and establish a fund of more than \$1million dollars in support of mental health initiatives supporting the students.

Advice to a budding leader: Get engaged early and often. This time with your children goes by so quickly when looking back so take advantage of everything that is offered and available. Your time, talent and treasure are more valuable than you can ever imagine to your child and the children your efforts impact directly or indirectly. Take advantage of any and all training opportunities as they will be applicable beyond your time with PTA. Don't be afraid to explore new things or make mistakes. Learning and building upon your experiences is a journey well worth taking.

Advice to PTA leader wanting to become President of National PTA: Becoming President of National PTA is not a position I sought after. I always pursued my passion in wanting to explore new opportunities at all levels of PTA. Whatever that next stage of engagement was for me, I wanted to try it all. I used my voice at all levels of government and got my hands dirty in every task at each of the events I participated in. It was all good.

My advice to anyone wanting to become the National PTA President is to pursue this position in support of furthering the Mission as a servant leader and not for any self-gain or resume builder. Our Mission is pure and so should your desire to oversee such an Association that represents all children with one voice. It is ultimately a business so having that experience is a must. Being an effective leader, good listener, collaborator, mentor, coach are all qualities that will make you successful but having a focused belief in our Mission and the passion and drive to expand upon our vision is critical.

What would I do differently if I had a chance: Listen to my gut more. That inner voice we all have called intuition is key. Also, respond more to the needs of your emotion and heart. PTA is a people business. PTA is a family business. PTA is a community business.

What is next for me: I have been a servant leader all my life. PTA provided me a backstage pass into the educational life of my children that I could have never experienced on my own. I will continue with PTA as Immediate Past President, as a leader in Scouting, my Church, my town History Museum and other initiatives that involve and engage youth.

Which figure reflects my leadership path: How about A & B. While we tend to plan out our path before us, many times it is the chaos or dishevelment that provide us with the most clarity and purpose. As they always say, best laid plans...be flexible, learn from failure and do not be afraid to make mistakes. Try to take advantage of all situations especially the ones that do not present themselves clearly and concisely. Learn from previous trials and tribulations. Remember the road less traveled philosophy or to blaze a new trail. Be true to yourself and your beliefs, be altruistic and pure of heart and either path will get you there. I seem to choose the path with more bumps for some reason.

Figure A



Figure B

