

TALK GREENVILLE

15 Minutes With: Meta Bowers, Director of Greenville's Meyer Center for Special Children

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When Meta Bowers joined the Meyer Center for Special Children in 2019, she brought social service, fundraising, nonprofit and administrative skills developed over more than two decades.

One of the biggest challenges facing the Meyer Center when Bowers arrived was too much demand for its specialized program of early education and therapy for children with special needs.

Her focus was a strategic effort to whittle down a long-standing waiting list and serve more students with disabilities, ranging from birth to second grade, both immediately and in the longer term.

A little more than a year after her arrival, the pandemic upended education everywhere, especially for the Meyer Center, founded in 1954 by pediatric surgeon Dr. Leslie Meyer.

The school grew from his work with children at Shriner's Hospital in Greenville. At the time, most children with disabilities or other special needs had very little access to education, but Meyer's vision was for them to be able to live engaged, alert and meaningful lives.

Today, the Meyer Center operates a licensed daycare and a public charter school. It receives public funding but must also rely on private support for nearly half of the cost of educating its students.

In 2024, the Meyer Center will celebrate 70 years of serving Greenville and Bowers says she is eager to lead the school into the future and help its students and families reach their maximum potential.

Bowers lives in Easley. She has three children, Trey, Myra and Leah, and enjoys adventure travel, hiking with her Sheepadoodle, George, and DIY home improvement projects.

TALK GREENVILLE: *Thank you for taking the time to talk with us. First, talk a little about what the Meyer Center offers its students that more traditional school settings just can't.*

META BOWERS: As a non-profit public charter school, the Meyer Center's unique model provides school-based therapy, education and nursing services for children with disabilities - during the school day. Being able to offer specialized techniques and services in a school environment sets us apart from other public schools. We focus on the needs of the whole child and building success, both at school and in their entire environment and community.

TG: *That's unique not just in our area, but in the region, right? Did I read that there are families who move here just so their children can have the opportunity to attend the Meyer Center?*

MB: That's right. The Meyer Center is the only place in the Upstate where young children with disabilities can receive all their special education and intensive therapies under one roof. It's a benefit to the entire family unit. We serve students who live in all areas of Greenville County and provide transportation to extend access to children in rural areas and surrounding counties.

Programs like ours are rare. We have had several families move to Greenville specifically because they were searching for these intensive interventions, which, when provided at such an early age, help close the gap between a child with a disability and their typical peers.

TG: *You've made a priority of making the Meyer Center available to as many students as possible, but how long is the waiting list on average?*

MB: Right before open enrollment in February, it can be as high as 80 students. On average it hovers at roughly 50.

TG: *What's the biggest limitation – space? staff? funding?*

MB: Great question – really, it's all three. Funding, space and staff are all intricately connected. Though our charter permits us to increase the number of students we serve, we have filled all classrooms and maximized our space.

Providing the highest quality service to as many students as possible is a priority for me and our board. We have a long-range planning committee and are developing a long-term plan for growth and sustainability. We do know this: Additional funding and qualified staff will be needed to expand -- and sustain -- our services.

TG: *If you would, talk a little bit about how the MC has evolved over its history.*

MB: The MC has evolved significantly over its 70-year history, in terms of enrollment, the types of disabilities and the kinds of services we offer. In 1954 the focus was almost solely on children with Cerebral Palsy and physical therapy. Today, we serve all disabilities and offer speech therapy, occupational therapy and education. Our focus is on giving our kiddos the best possible start so they can experience all the opportunities to be included in their communities, secure gainful employment and enjoy long-term independence.

There have been several organizational milestones along the way to get to this point. But the greatest milestones are the ones we see every day in the children we serve -- when they begin to use verbal speech, feed themselves and put their shoes and socks on independently, write letters and count. It's all about helping children reach their potential.

TG: *What's the thing that has changed the most since you first walked in the doors as director in 2019?*

MB: Since 2019, we have been shifting the culture of the Meyer Center from maintaining its present level of service to ensuring that we continue to lead into the future. Our program has grown significantly. We have added four new classes and have grown from serving 85 students to 108, with 11 established classrooms. We've also come out of the other side of the global pandemic, which has transformed national, state and local educational systems and workforce.

TG: *Why make the change from Meals on Wheels to this very specialized setting? Did you have some connection to the Meyer Center before you worked there?*

MB: I had always heard wonderful things about the Meyer Center but had no real connection to the organization. When I learned about the Executive Director position, and particularly the organization's waiting list, I saw it as an incredible opportunity to lend my skills and experience in a different way. Honestly, there are more similarities than differences between Meals on Wheels and the Meyer Center. The simple fact is no one plans to need either service, but when they do, they cannot afford to wait. I believe that services like these are a

cornerstone of a healthy community and should be accessible to all who need them when they need them.

TG: *Does not coming from an educational background give you a perspective others might not have?*

MB: Yes, I think so. I am a life-long learner and curious by nature. I was eager to learn more about all aspects of the programs and finances, including education. As a non-profit leader, I think it is important that all decisions are tied back to the organization's mission. This requires innovative thinking in an organization like the Meyer Center that is governed by so many laws and regulations. I think my experience of building a smaller grassroots non-profit from the ground up provides a different perspective, one that pursues ways for the Meyer Center to harness its flexibility of being a non-profit rather than a stagnant educational institution.

TG: *You've seen the Meyer Center through almost five years. What do you envision for the next five or even 10 years?*

MB: In the near term, I'd like to enhance our current programs, and partner with local colleges and universities, architects and others to develop a strategic plan that will build a bridge from our current programming to the future.

In the longer term, I'd like to address our waiting list and serve more students. I'd like to ensure we have a sustainable funding model that will support our growth, focusing on a more well-rounded program that could include typical peers, afterschool, summer camp and expansion of outpatient therapy.

TG: *Educating and nurturing a child who has special needs requires dedication from their entire family, right? How does the Meyer Center help support students' family members?*

MB: No child comes with directions. Nurturing a child with a disability works best when the entire family is engaged in what we do. We place special emphasis on engaging our families from Day One to help them navigate what is a very complex journey. We are in constant communication with our families so we can work together to reinforce the skills their child is learning at school -- both at home and in the community. Parents will be their child's life-long advocates. We want them to be equipped with the tools they need to succeed. We provide counseling, advocacy and coordination of community services for our students and their families. In addition, we plan family engagement activities throughout the year -- that

range from informal gatherings to meet and support other families to informational sessions about how to best advocate for a child with disabilities.

TG:*I'm sure you see remarkable moments every day, but could you share a couple of particularly memorable ones?*

MB: Prior to enrolling at the Meyer Center, our families often hear scary statistics and facts about what their child *won't* do. It is so heartwarming to see their joy when they start to hear and experience all that their child *can* do. Examples that come to mind are when parents hear their children communicate "I love you" for the first time. Families can take a successful trip to the grocery store because their child has learned to self-soothe and cope with overstimulation. Children often make their very first friends at the Meyer Center. These are just a few examples of the life-changing successes our students and families experience every day.

TG:*OK, I have to ask, especially since it's mentioned in your bio – Meta IS a very unusual name. Where does it come from? Family name?*

MB: Ironically, I've had many people tell me they know someone named Meta, but never in my life have I met another Meta. Ha! Growing up, my mom said Meta was the name of one of her patients she cared for as a nurse in the hospital. She worked nights and honestly, I wonder if she was just sleep deprived or made it up. I guess we will all see if the popularity of the name Meta increases now that it is the official name of the world's largest social media platforms. In the meantime, I am still waiting for Mark Zuckerberg to return my email.

TG:*You're from Pickens, right? And spent the first 25 years of your career working for organizations there. How are those Upstate roots helpful in this role?*

MB: I relocated to Pickens County in 1997. I quickly inserted myself into the community through volunteerism and professional efforts. This helped me understand the roots of the Upstate and the fine art of getting things done. Local issues have the greatest effect on individuals. No matter the community, developing relationships and collaborating with those in public service and those seeking to make a difference are key in accomplishing any goal. I am fortunate to have found and worked alongside some amazing people that work tirelessly to make a positive difference in all that they do.

TG:*What's your favorite thing to do when you're not working? Your favorite place?*

MB: My favorite thing to do is to simply be outside. I love to hike, camp, and travel the world. My favorite place, hmmm, that is a difficult decision because I haven't been everywhere ... yet. If I had to pick from my experiences, I would say climbing Mt. Kilimanjaro and going on a Safari in the Serengeti is my favorite so far with trekking Iceland's Laugavegur Trail coming in at a close second.

TG:*How would your staff describe you as a boss?*

MB: I have been told that I have been the most involved Director the Meyer Center has ever had. I think they would describe me as mission-focused, pragmatic, fair, firm and willing to do anything that I would expect of them. Our staff is amazing. We all have our talents. They are the magic of the Meyer Center.

TG:*If the Meyer Center could magically, instantly be granted one wish for something, what would it be?*

MB: You asked me to dream big. If I had one wish, it would be for the Meyer Center to have a state-of-the-art campus specifically designed for our population. It would include everything from the safety and security measures to correcting the proximity, size and number of classrooms, therapy gyms and play spaces. Ultimately, it would allow us to grow to serve more students in the best possible way. Our current space has reached its maximum potential.

We could eliminate so many everyday frustrations, like car line in the rain (especially for our kids in wheelchairs), or the amount of time and energy it takes to physically move a class of 10 across the building to the playground or indoor play spaces, and the struggle to maximize our small classrooms so they are not bogged down with equipment and kids have the space they need to explore.

