



Dear Mr. Springsteen:

My name is Erica. I am a violinist and graduate of Drexel University with a bachelor's degree in Biological Sciences. I plan on pursuing a career in dentistry.

In 2010 I was lucky enough to be chosen among a group of teenage girls to be Miss New Jersey Teen USA. I took it and ran (or rather walked, somehow, in heels) and carried with me everything I had felt in my then-eighteen-years of living.

Instead of all of the warmth, laughs and fun of being a teenager, I experienced all of the fear, anxiety and unannounced waves of self-doubt. I would lie awake wiping my face with a tear-drenched sweatshirt, trying to find answers why I was experiencing this; anxiously counting the minutes as my 6:30 am alarm would sound and the stress and anxiety would carry with me day after day, year after year.

As a lonely young person and through all of the times when I was made fun of for the smallest, most insignificant details about who I am; escaping into my world of music, playing the violin, watching movies and reading books that my "friends" at the time called "weird," all helped me through those really confusing years.

It was gratifying to win a pageant, especially after being a target of bullying myself and having to learn how to be a confident person. All I had truly ever wanted was to connect with people, and to help others connect with each other. As a title-holder, to be able to connect to a younger crowd and be a positive role model to others was incredibly self-rewarding as I promoted the platform of anti-bullying.

During my year as Miss NJ Teen in 2010, I found a fledgling organization with the concept of creating an effective and hands-on approach towards embracing children. Today, it is home to the Kickin' It Kids Anti-Bullying Center, a 501(c)(3) non-profit organization headquartered in Monmouth County, New Jersey. It is the first and only of its kind in the country with programs designed for children preschool through college. Kickin' It has become an award winning charity, being recognized and endorsed by the mayor and Governors' office.

With no grants, connections or influences, this wasn't exactly an easy task. When the Kickin' It Center began, it was led by students and still is to this day, students like myself who are passionate about making positive changes to help create a safe and warm school and social climate.

Kickin' It began like any other campaign against bullying, by holding assemblies at schools and raising overall awareness about the widespread epidemic that has become of bullying. Unfortunately, this approach can only do so much to effectively comfort and support kids who are feeling lonely, out of place and scared.

Seven years ago, Kickin' It began a pilot program by working out of an old warehouse on Adelpia Road in Howell. The program invited children to come and practice good manners, respect, friendliness and kindness with and towards one another, starting with 2 kids and within very few months, having nearly 200 wanting to participate.

After Hurricane Sandy, Kickin' It found a building on Route 9 in Freehold. Together, with the community, we gutted and repaired the building. Upon initiation, NJ.com ran a story and just before the grand opening the owner of the property made the decision to change the land use... and we lost the space.

After addressing the township board and fighting the change of use, we were told that although the owner had broken the lease, they were free to do whatever they intended with the property. We were told by the owner that we did not have the resources to fight them, and that we should just go, quietly.

We were left with no option, we had to leave. We were devastated. The community helped repair the building and we had invested every penny; but the most upsetting was that we had nowhere for the kids to go.

We begged for space anywhere we could. The Microsoft Store in the Freehold Mall was kind enough to allow us to meet for two hours on Friday nights. We met students at Liberty Oak and Turkey Swamp Park. We did anything we could to keep nurturing the home which we started to build, to ensure the kids that Kickin' It would never abandon them.

We then found a place in Farmingdale and had an agreement with the seller. After holding some events, we lost the space due to the loss of promised funds to finalize the deal. In 2015, we found an ad on Craigslist to lease a pre-school in Manalapan, but we could not bare the thought of losing a space again. For months we negotiated with the property owner and settled on an all or nothing deal, with them holding the note and allow us the option of buying the property within 36 months.

Although the clock is still ticking as we have less than a year left to secure the finances to purchase the property that is in disrepair, requiring much work, with no operating kitchen or central air...we can however finally say that we have an all-inclusive center like no other, welcoming and supporting all children preschool through college!

Along the way we have suffered many blows and we are struggling to stay open; but we feel our story teaches the importance of determination and perseverance. Just work hard, make sacrifices, do things honestly and anything is possible.

It's hard to imagine Kickin' It without its scars, how it has bruised and healed, and how it continues to grow alongside the children themselves. It is equally, if not more so, hard to imagine the kids without Kickin' It.

This is how Kickin' It is continuing to operate with noble individuals, leading by this example. The director of the Kickin' It Center is a Montclair student working two jobs to help support student programs. High school and college students continue to volunteer their time and work together to create fundraisers from bagging groceries at ShopRite, to car washes and community events.

The founder of Kickin' It works at the Englishtown Post Office. She's one of the most selfless people I have met in my 25 years of living. She takes terms like "above and beyond" and "limitless" to the absolute extreme, with her auctioning and selling personal possessions to keep Kickin' It thriving. I'd say we're pretty close to forbidding her from selling things that actually keep this woman alive. She goes so far as to personally provide food, clothing and other personal items for students.

It's hard to describe Kickin' It in words, especially when I'm writing you this letter. What is shrouded by the title of "Kickin' It" it's more than just a center against bullying: it is a learning academy, a camp for youth development, a provider of a multitude of positive outlet programs and leadership workshops. A warm and welcoming place filled with tolerance, unity, kindness and above all a safe environment where true friendships are made.

But we desperately need a voice. We need a hero to support our center, so that it can remain open for the kids now and for generations to come. We are just advocates, educators, students, volunteers, mentors trying to provide all of the resources we can for children without philanthropic connections.

Mr. Springsteen, it is you who has the voice of an unmaterialistic person who has been true to himself from the start. It would be the greatest honor to have you be the hero Kickin' It kids need. Helping Kickin It spread the message no matter where they are from, who they are, regardless of life's obstacles and through difficult and lonely times... there are those who will support, love and accept them as they are.

Your support would provide Kickin' It the missing link to making an immense impact on our community, on the nation. By simply supporting us, even if it's a small way, your voice will help Kickin' It reach countless students who need a place to go during hard times; a place for them to freely develop into their own unique selves. Having a positive role male model, like yourself would inspire so many kids and instill them with confidence, knowing that a man of your stature is in their corner and understands what they are experiencing.

We invite you to meet the students, hear our passion, see how our programs are effectively working, and we know you will be proud to stand in our corner. On behalf of the founder, the staff, volunteers and students "Thank You for Your Time and Consideration".

Yours Truly,

Erica Szymanski

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