
Turning it around

By Joseph P. Kahn

Globe Staff / November 15, 2011

As a teenager growing up in Brookline, Saskia Epstein began “experimenting with things much too young,” as she put it. After her parents divorced, a close friend was killed in a tragic car accident, and she chose to drop out of high school, Epstein risked not having much of a future at all.

That she was chosen last month to run a national organization helping low-income families, one with a \$3 million annual budget, 17 full-time employees, thousands of volunteers, and ambitious growth plans, shows how far Epstein has come. Not just in turning her own life around but using it to improve the lives of society’s most vulnerable.

At the annual Boston fund-raiser for her organization, Room to Grow, a beaming Epstein, 38, mingled with some of the city’s most prominent donors. The event raised \$450,000 and put Epstein squarely in the spotlight as she prepares to assume the title of chief executive later this year.

“Luckily, I found something I was good at - working with children - and a sense of purpose, which was a great gift,” said Epstein, in an interview at her Back Bay offices. “It connected me to something larger than myself.”

Hers has been an unusual career trajectory, one as inspirational as it has been unconventional, according to many who know her.

“She’s a treasure, and I’m someone who naturally gravitates toward a more traditional resume,” said Room to Grow founder Julie Burns, who is stepping down as chief executive. “But it was very clear from the outset that Saskia was exceptional.”

At Brookline High School, her husband, Paul, a staff social worker (and former Red Sox general manager Theo Epstein’s twin), uses his wife’s example to help students make hard decisions about staying in school. “I bring up Saskia to show how dropping out is not the end of the world,” he said. “On the other hand, she’s probably one in a million, achieving what she has with her educational background. So I remind them of that, too.”

Saskia Epstein does not hide the fact that for years she made poor choices in her life, partying much more than studying.

“My litmus test as a manager now,” she said, “is to think about potential over experience. Early on, I learned the traditional boundaries of what one should be capable of doing don’t necessarily apply.”

As Epstein prepares for her new role, Room to Grow is implementing a five-year strategic plan that will expand its services to three more US cities, in addition to existing offices in Boston and New York.

In Boston, the agency provides clothing, equipment, books, toys, and other necessities, plus a range of counseling services, to 350 young children and their families. Families are referred through hospitals and community health clinics and visit the organization’s offices every three months, from the last trimester of pregnancy through the child’s third birthday.

The Boston office has eight full-time staffers, over 2,000 volunteers, and a \$1.2 million operating budget. The Epsteins and their two children, ages 6 and 4, live in Brookline; she will remain here while running the national organization.

She will also continue working closely with the Foundation to Be Named Later, created by the Epstein family in 2005, early in Theo’s tenure with the Red Sox. The foundation supports numerous social service agencies, many of which family members have either worked for or benefited from over the years.

"It's safe to say the foundation's work owes as much to Saskia's vision as anyone's," said Allyce Najimy, the foundation's executive director, who has known Epstein for 20 years and seen her grow from troubled teen to self-assured executive.

That outcome was not always certain, however.

Born in the Netherlands, Epstein grew up in a politically progressive family. Her mother is a visual artist, her father an architect. At Brookline High, one of four high schools she would attend, an academically disengaged Epstein was experiencing "a lot of freedom and not much guidance," as she described her checkered academic career.

Paul Epstein was also at the school then, but the two did not know each other. "We were in completely different crowds," Saskia Epstein recalled with a smile. "He was profiled in the student paper as a honest student. And I was likely not in class a lot."

Later enrolled at Lincoln-Sudbury High, Epstein joined a community service program, where she befriended a classmate who was applying to City Year. Epstein had never heard of the Boston-based youth corps program, then only two years old. That spring, her friend died in a car crash. Epstein elected not to finish high school, but she did apply to City Year in her friend's memory - and was accepted for the 1991-92 corps year, a decision that proved life-changing.

"I felt like I could find a different path, which may actually have been the best decision I've ever made," she said. Part of the year was spent teaching third grade at Boston's Blackstone Elementary School. She also earned her GED. Classroom teaching, Epstein discovered, was something she loved and was gifted at.

City Year hired Epstein, where she worked as a team leader and on new-site development. She spent two more years there, then moved on to Citizen Schools, a national educational initiative promoting after-school learning, as a teacher, team leader, and director.

What she missed was the interaction she had experienced in the classroom at Blackstone. On nights and weekends, she worked for the Home for Little Wanderers, a family and child service agency. That work appealed to her even more, and she spent the next 10 years with the Home as a counselor and residential program director, working with emotionally and behaviorally disturbed kids.

"It was the most challenging work I'd ever done, which says a lot, considering what I'd already been doing," Epstein recalled. While running a group home in Jamaica Plain, she hired Paul Epstein, who had recently graduated from Boston University with a degree in social work. The two worked together closely for two years. In 2000, they began dating and married a year later.

In 2006 the Epsteins welcomed their first child, then another 16 months later. Meanwhile, they collaborated on another labor of love, the Brookline Teen Center, whose program development phase launched in 2006. The facility is scheduled to open in 2012.

Motherhood prompted Epstein to reevaluate her professional priorities once more. She was concerned about vulnerable youth after they aged out of state care, usually at 18. In many cases, their futures were not promising.

"That raised a lot of philosophical questions about my work at the Home," she said. "It felt like, as a society, we were standing around waiting for problems to happen, then assembling teams to try to fix them."

Coincidentally, in 2008 Room to Grow was looking for a new Boston director. Epstein blew everyone away, according to Julie Burns, who is married to filmmaker Ken Burns.

Asked if her family connections have overshadowed her own work, Epstein frowned. "I haven't directly experienced that," she said slowly. "But I wouldn't be surprised if there are people who don't know me and might view me in that light."

If there's any shadow cast, she continued, "It's over the seriousness of the work we do. We live in a society that gets really excited about celebrity, and in this town that's not just Hollywood stars, it's sports stars, too."

Strip away their public celebrity, and the Epsteins are "extraordinary human beings," she said. Theo's tenure with the Red Sox and philanthropic partnership with Paul "ultimately allows us to do things we never would have been able to

on a human services salary. That's quite meaningful."

As the organization looks to expand to other cities, it's logical that Chicago would be a strong candidate. "I knew that question would come up," Paul Epstein said with a laugh. Saskia Epstein grinned at that scenario, too. "I like Chicago very much," she said diplomatically. "And it was on our list long before Theo went there."

Joseph P. Kahn can be reached at jkahn@globe.com.

© Copyright 2011 Globe Newspaper Company.
