



# Craig Portwood Named Executive Director of esp Athens



## New Contact Information

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(Watkinsville, Georgia / February 2024) esp, Inc. has named Craig Portwood, a senior management professional with experience in not-for-profit organizations, as the new executive director for esp Athens. He will oversee strategic implementation of esp's programs, operations and fundraising specific to Athens. The announcement was made by esp Chief Executive Officer Laura Hope Whitaker and Chief People Officer Ashley Stewart.

The Chason Group was retained by esp Athens to lead the executive search process.

"Craig represents esp's core values and mission," according to Whitaker. "esp's culture of love and inclusion must be conveyed from all facets of our organization. His experiences and presence will have an extremely positive impact with our participants, team members, volunteers, and donors. I am very excited for him to join our team of professionals."

The executive position was recently developed under a new model of operations for the organization. Whitaker has been serving in the role and now will transition to spend more of her energies growing esp on a national level. Three other fully operational sites are planned for 2024 in Georgia.

Portwood most recently served as associate vice president of alumni and main campus operations at Georgia Military College in Milledgeville, Georgia. He has also held the director of alumni and community engagement and director of development positions with the college.

Other positions Portwood has held include chief operating officer / senior communicator with Northridge Christian Church in Milledgeville and youth pastor of Tomoka Christian Church in Ormond Beach, Florida.

"The opportunity to serve as executive director of esp Athens has been a dream for me," according to Portwood. "There are so many great initiatives underway with the programs and families, each serving a true purpose in the lives of so many. I look forward to becoming a part of the team that celebrates the participants and their families by recognizing their special abilities."

"Our team was seeking a professional with experience in fundraising, program development, management and team building," Stewart said. "Craig has these experiences. He also has the ability to educate and engage the community, as well as interact and develop relationships with the families of esp. Probably the most important

trait for Craig is his knack for recognizing the impact esp has had on the lives of those that we serve. He is a very caring individual.”

Portwood earned an Associate of Arts degree, general studies from Daytona State College, Daytona Beach, Florida; a Bachelor of Science degree, exercise science from Lipscomb University, Nashville, Tennessee; and Master of Science degree, health services administration from the University of Central Florida, Orlando, Florida. He also is recognized as a Certified Fund Raising Executive.

Other recognitions for Portwood include being a member of the Atrium Health Navicent Baldwin Board of Directors and his induction into the Mainland High School Athletic Training Hall of Fame, Mainland, Florida in 2004.

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### **About Extra Special People, Inc.**

esp was founded in 1986 when Martha Wyllie, esp’s founder, noticed an unequal number of opportunities for children with disabilities and began the first one-week summer camp for 21 participants. Programs began taking place in community gathering spaces until they could open their own gym five years later in Watkinsville, Georgia. For two decades, esp conducted their programs there with the number of participants growing every year. When Wyllie passed away in 2004, she left behind a growing legacy; and Laura Hope Whitaker, now CEO, stepped into the role of executive director at age 19. esp identified the need for family support and year-round programming and created the esp 360 program. Through Java Joy, esp expanded into Atlanta and Rome, Georgia in 2020. Now, esp provides all three of its programs in Rome: Java Joy, 360 Programming and Hooray Camp. esp’s board and leadership team have developed a 10-year strategic plan that envisions esp being a nationally recognized leader in transforming communities in multiple states through programs for people with all abilities.

### **About The Chason Group.**

esp retained The Chason Group ([www.thechasongroup.com](http://www.thechasongroup.com)), an executive search firm specializing in non-profit organizations, to lead the recruitment process. The firm has also led executive searches in the Athens area for the Athens Area Community Foundation, Athens Area Chamber of Commerce, Food Bank of Northeast Georgia, Georgia 4-H Foundation, and Mercy Health Center.