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Gratitude

NICK PALOS
ERICSA President



The Roman philosopher and statesman Cicero once said, "Gratitude is not only the greatest of virtues, but the parent of all others" (Oratio Pro Chæo Plancio section XXXIII). Cicero presents gratitude as the foundational virtue, suggesting that it is the source from which all other virtues arise. This belief has shaped our civic traditions, leading us to dedicate a single day each year to express gratitude for the blessings and experiences of the past year—whether directed toward friends, family, God, or ourselves.

As I write this while sitting in front of my computer on the evening after the New York City Marathon was held (no, I did not participate), it dawns on me that another year is fast reaching its end. Halloween has just passed, and we soon will turn to that holiday which traditionally marks the beginning of the holiday shopping season, Thanksgiving Day.

Oftentimes, we spend Thanksgiving Day with loved ones, indulging in all sorts of seasonal delights. The day is filled with traditions such as watching parades and football games and enjoying festive meals. Amidst these celebrations, it is easy to lose sight of the true meaning behind the holiday.

No matter to whom we owe our debts of gratitude, there is something within us that causes us to pause and reflect on the gifts and support we receive. Whether our feelings of thankfulness are directed toward friends, family, a higher power, or even ourselves, this inner sense of appreciation compels us to

continues



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recognize the influences and experiences that have shaped our lives. The act of expressing gratitude is not merely a ritual but a response rooted deeply in our character, affirming the importance of acknowledging those who have contributed to our journey.

As I start to reflect on this past year, I am reminded of the individuals who have helped shape who I am, both personally and professionally. Their support and encouragement have been instrumental in my journey, and I am truly grateful for their presence in my life.

I am especially blessed to have a wife who stands by me in all facets of my life. Her unwavering support has been vital as I balance my responsibilities as ERICSA President and my role as a Support Magistrate in the Family Court of the State of New York. Her encouragement has given me the strength to pursue my goals and overcome challenges along the way.

My growth within the court system has also been influenced by supervising judges who believe in my potential and have given me room to innovate. Their openness has enabled me to work directly with the New York City child support office, where I had the opportunity to help develop a problem-solving court model. These experiences have deepened my commitment to serving families and improving our court processes. I have worked with judges who served as examples on how to be effective in my role, and I have been given the opportunity to teach new colleagues, as well as new judges, about the work that we do.

I have been mentored by many of the superstars of the child support world; Meg Haynes is always there when I find a New York court doing something bizarre when it comes to interjurisdictional support. Margot Bean was there helping me in my quest to serve ERICSA in any capacity for which I was needed. Jim Fleming provided his wisdom on how to effectively draw other people into a conversation during a meeting. The list goes on from there.

I am grateful for the two opportunities my fellow Support Magistrates gave me to lead our statewide association. The association's drive to obtain greater respect for the work we do for the court system in New York allowed me to experience, firsthand, the byzantine maze one needed to navigate in getting anything through the New York state legislature, resulting in the change in our job title and an expansion of our terms of office. It was also valuable experience in helping to affect the passage of UIFSA 2008 in New York a decade later.

Finally, looking back on the past year and a half, I am also extremely grateful for my fellow members of the ERICSA Executive Committee. I am honored to be working with some of the hardest working professionals in stewarding ERICSA through my term. The same goes for our Board and our Honorary Board. Finally, I would be remiss in not owing a debt of gratitude to the entire ERICSA family. As individuals, you are all amazing professionals, colleagues and friends. And for that, I am truly grateful. ■

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Grateful Enough to Notice

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If you are anything like me, you take things for granted. Not because you're ungrateful, but because, as the sage Ferris Bueller once said, "Life moves pretty fast. If you don't stop and look around once in a while, you could miss it." Days blur together. Work, family, deadlines, super-market runs, weekend trips to the in-laws, etc. Before you know it, another season has passed, and you can't actually remember if you ever stopped to enjoy any of it.

Gratitude isn't something humans lack; it's something we forget to practice. It's not always about saying "Hey thanks!" out loud, but about noticing. Becoming a new dad has made this reality even clearer. My days

are full, and my sleep is light, but in between all the chaos, I've tried to notice the moments that matter – the way a baby's laugh can reset your mood instantly, or how a quiet few minutes at home can help you forget about the week's worth of laundry in the basement. (Seriously, please text before coming over. It's a mess here.)

Of course, gratitude isn't just challenged by busyness and being behind on chores; it's also buried under the constant noise of being plugged in. The news cycle never ends, and the tone of public conversation often leaves me more anxious and annoyed than informed. It's easy to get caught up in everything happening "out there" and forget to take inventory of what's good right here.

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So, what is a control freak like me supposed to do? Control what I can control. I've been trying to be more deliberate about my own perspective. Everyone we interact with is carrying a unique blend of emotions, mental and physical well-being, and their own perspectives about the state of the world. Remembering this doesn't just make us more empathetic, but it can heighten our awareness of how much we actually have to be thankful for. Small acts of patience, understanding, and forgiveness that we see every day can easily go unnoticed, but they're the quiet backbone of most of our interactions.

What is gratitude, then? An emotion? I don't think so. I think it's a discipline. It's the conscious act of noticing and staying grounded amid all the noise and responsibility. So, as the year continues to fly by, I'm trying to make a little more space for that discipline. To recognize the ordinary moments that deserve more credit. To stop and look around once in a while, because I don't want to miss it.

I bet you didn't think I would get more mileage out of that Ferris Bueller quote from the first paragraph, did you? ■



Gratitude in Action

Cultivating Positivity at Home and Work

BRANDY WILLIAMS

Louisiana DCFS, ERICSA Board Member



Why Gratitude Matters

W Gratitude is more than saying “thank you.” It is a mindset that helps us recognize the positive moments in life and work. Practicing gratitude

daily can reduce stress, improve relationships, and boost overall well-being. These suggestions highlight simple ways to bring gratitude into both your personal life and your workplace.

Gratitude in Everyday Life

■ Keep a Gratitude Journal

Write down three things you’re thankful for each

day. Small joys – like a warm cup of coffee, a kind word, or a peaceful walk – are just as important as major accomplishments.

■ Start and End the Day with Reflection

Focus on what went well. Begin your morning by appreciating the day ahead and end your evening reflecting on positive moments.

■ Express Gratitude to Others

Send a thank-you note, text, or make a call to someone who has made a difference in your life. Small gestures can have a big impact.

■ Practice Mindful Gratitude

Notice the small pleasures in everyday life – the warmth of sunlight, a smile, or a quiet moment. Being

continues



present increases awareness of life's blessings.

■ **Create a Gratitude Jar**

Drop notes about happy moments or achievements into a jar. Revisit them when you need a boost or a reminder of life's positives.

■ **Reflect During Challenges**

Even tough times can teach valuable lessons. Ask yourself, *"What did I learn?"* or *"What support or strength did I gain?"*

■ **Start Family Gratitude Routine**

Encourage loved ones to share what they're thankful for at meals or bedtime. It strengthens connections and builds a positive home environment.

By focusing on gratitude daily, you can shift your mindset from focusing on what is lacking to appreciating what is abundant. Gratitude, when practiced consistently, has the power to transform ordinary days into moments of contentment and peace.

Gratitude in the Workplace

A culture of gratitude is one of the most powerful drivers of morale and engagement in any organization. When employees feel appreciated, they are more motivated, loyal, and collaborative. Gratitude in the workplace does not have to be elaborate, it simply requires consistency and sincerity.

■ **Start Meetings with Appreciation**

Invite team members to recognize one another or highlight recent successes. This sets a positive tone and reinforces teamwork.

■ **Recognize Contributions**

Celebrate efforts big and small—completing projects, supporting colleagues, or sharing ideas.

Recognition reinforces value and boosts morale.

■ **Send Personal Appreciation Notes**

A short email or handwritten note thanking someone for their contribution goes a long way toward making employees feel valued.

■ **Celebrate Wins and Milestones**

Acknowledging achievements reminds employees that their work matters and encourages continued effort.

■ **Express Gratitude During Challenges**

Appreciate effort, even if results are not perfect. Phrases like, "I appreciate the hard work you put into this" show support and resilience.

■ **Lead with Gratitude**

Leaders who model appreciation create a culture of positivity. Regular expressions of thanks build trust and strengthen relationships.

■ **Weekly Reflection**

Reflect at the end of the week on accomplishments and contributions. Sharing these reflections motivates the team for the week ahead.

A grateful workplace inspires collaboration, improves communication, and creates a sense of belonging. When appreciation becomes part of the culture, people are not only more productive, but they are happier, too.

Closing Thought

Gratitude transforms ordinary moments into meaningful ones. By intentionally practicing gratitude at home and in the workplace, we can foster positivity, strengthen relationships, and build a culture of appreciation. ■

Gratitude at the Train Station

RIEDA ABRAMS-MILLER

Communications Chair, ERICSA Board



I wasn't planning on writing an article for this year's gratitude edition, and then the universe told me, "Yes, sis, you are." I recently watched a TikTok about the Train Station Theory and thought "Hey, that's a great way to present this". So,

with some research and help from CoPilot, let's talk about the **Train Station Theory of Relationships**.

It's easy to fall into the trap of believing that someone leaving our life is a big, bad, horrible thing and completely our fault. This could not be further from the truth. A long time ago, I adopted the perspective

that people came into my life for a season and/or to teach me something. Even though some exits really hurt, I do my best to find the lesson in it. I am grateful for that perspective; it has helped me through some really hard 'exits'.

Less theory, more metaphor, the **Train Station Theory of Relationships** is a way of looking at the impact of the people who come and go in our lives. Think of your life as a train journey and you are the train. The people you meet are the passengers on your train. Some passengers stay for a brief ride, some for many miles, and others stay for almost the entire journey. *continues*



How does this fit in with gratitude? Read on to find out!

Departures happen; people WILL get off your train. Most, you might have to throw off. Sometimes their journey simply diverges from yours, and sometimes, they make such a mess and cause so much damage that they just have to go. Irrespective of how they leave, a departure is not a failure on your part.

- **Appreciate the Short-term Travelers.** They may have taught you something, supported you through difficult times, or simply made the journey a bit more fun.

Letting go is part of growth. Trying to hold on to every passenger can slow you down. Let people depart.

Be careful of “frequent flyers”. If someone wants to rejoin your journey, remember the reason(s) they got off before. Some are worth allowing back on,

others are not. Know the value of being on the ride with you.

Focus on your path. Your job is to keep your train on the tracks and moving forward. Honor your journey.

- **Cherish the Long-Term Companions.** For those still riding with you, show gratitude for their continued presence. They stayed on board through opportunities to depart and all of the stops for maintenance and upkeep on your journey. Let’s look at what some of those stops might have entailed.

Routine inspections (*self-reflection and emotional check ins*): Be grateful for moments of clarity and self-awareness.

Track alignment (*staying aligned with your values and goals*): Appreciate the people who help you stay on course.

continues



Brake checks (*setting boundaries and hitting pause*): Thank those who respect your limits and help you slow down.

Engine Overhaul (*deep healing or personal transformation*): Be grateful for the strength to rebuild and for those who support you.

Cleaning & Upkeep (*self-care and mental hygiene*): Appreciate the rituals and people that help you feel refreshed.

Signal System Maintenance (*communication skills and emotional intelligence*): Value those who communicate clearly and help you grow.

Upgrades and Modernization (*learning, evolving, adapting*): Be thankful for experiences that challenge and improve you.

Emergency Repairs (*crisis management and resilience*): Recognize those who show up when you fall apart.

■ **Be Thankful for the Lessons.** Anyone on board can teach us something.

Lessons don't have to be big. Sometimes it's just a reminder of something we already knew.

Some of our biggest lessons are learned from the messiest and most harmful passengers. Whether we kick them off or they depart on their own, find the lessons in the damage they left behind and be grateful that they are gone.

Don't overlook the longer-term passengers, they are examples of loyalty, patience, and love.

■ **Celebrate Your Own Journey.** Recognize your progress, your ability to navigate transitions and changes, and the ability to keep going through tough terrain.

Recognize your resilience.

Recognize the improvements you've made.

Recognize the patience of those long-term riders, their encouragement as you sometimes inch your way forward.

Enjoy the scenery! Don't get so focused on moving forward that you don't enjoy the beauty around you.

We've been talking about **YOUR** train. Remember that you, too, have been a passenger on others' trains. On some trains, you've found a comfy seat and settled in for the long haul. On others, you've gotten off somewhere along the line, the same way others have gotten off your train.

People will come into your life and then leave. It is part of life's journey, even when it hurts or you miss someone. With grace, perspective, and acceptance we can be grateful for those with whom we have traveled and the impact they have left on our hearts and minds.

Wishing you all a smooth ride with passengers that respect and value all you do for them. I encourage you to think about who those passengers are right now, how they make your journey better, and how you can show them you are grateful they are taking this ride with you. ■

Grateful Connections

Finding Purpose Through Positivity

DERRICK BRANDON

Communications Specialist, Georgia DCSS



This year, Georgia DCSS leadership has made it a priority to visit local offices and spend time with team members, beginning each meeting with a simple but powerful question: What's something

positive you're grateful for in your life right now?

The answers have been both inspiring and heartfelt. Team members shared moments of gratitude, from celebrating graduations and taking memorable vacations to discovering new hobbies and personal achievements. Others, even while facing challenging times, expressed deep appreciation for their colleagues' support and the positive things around them. These stories remind us that gratitude not only lifts our spirits but also strengthens the bonds that make the Division so remarkable.

This focus on appreciation ties closely to our 2025 conference theme: Remembering the Why: Keeping the Human in Human Services. The theme underscores the importance of staying connected to our purpose and to one another. Many conference attendees have shared how meaningful it is to keep their "why" at the center of their daily work, serving as a reminder of the impact they make in the lives of children and families across Georgia.

As DCSS moves forward, the goal is to continue to bring gratitude to every part of our work, whether it's to our teams, the families we serve, or the difference we make each day. Together, we keep the "human" in human services by remembering why we do what we do — and for that, we are truly grateful. ■



A Season of Gratitude

Reflections from the ERICSA Board

As we enter this season of reflection and thanksgiving, I am deeply grateful for the ERICSA Board and every member of our remarkable community. Your commitment, leadership, and heartfelt dedication strengthen and enrich our mission every day.

I am equally thankful for my precious family, friends, and the daily blessings that inspire compassion, resilience, and hope. Together, we lift families, support one another, and advance the noble work of ensuring every child has stability, opportunity, and love.

Thank you for the privilege of serving alongside you.

May this season remind us of the strength we find in one another and the immense impact we make together. In gratitude, unity, and service, we continue to lift families and support the children at the heart of our mission.

With appreciation and warmest wishes,

Sharon Pizzuti

Thankful for the people in my life and the growing circle of changemakers I get to learn from and grow with.

Stacie Alexander

I am profoundly grateful for the people of ERICSA – a community that is not just like a family; we are family.

A family that supports one another through good times and bad. We are mentors, colleagues, and friends. Let's continue to support one another – whether it's working on a case, connecting to continue learning, or simply offering support to those in need. I look forward to seeing how strong we are when we support one another. I am grateful for each and every one of you, past and present."

Susan E. Smith

I am grateful for the child support community and the passion each of you have for making a difference in a family's life through the noble work you do. In doing the work every day, you help our program lift families out of poverty, find stability, and provide safety.

Ann Marie Oldani

Practicing gratitude daily can be as simple as taking a few quiet moments each morning or evening to reflect on what you appreciate. I encourage everyone to start keeping a gratitude journal, where you jot down three things you're thankful for each day. Always remember to express thanks directly to people in your life by sending a quick note or sharing a kind word. By consciously focusing on the positive aspects – no matter how small – I am training my mind to notice and appreciate the good, even during challenging times. Over time, these acts of gratitude have helped shift my perspective, boost my mood, and strengthen my relationships. Take the first step – what did you appreciate today?

Dana N. Grimm

I am grateful for where life has taken me, for the new journeys I have been able to embark on, and for the wonderful new connections and friends I have made. I am most grateful for the strength to move forward, to see my purpose, and to visualize my future. I cherish the seen and unseen, the quiet and the loud – all reminders of just how blessed I truly am.

Brandy Z. Williams

I am grateful for a career that has allowed me to grow, learn, and make so many amazing friends.

Laura A. Bernacki
Stone

I am beyond grateful to be serving as an ERICSA Board Member. The opportunity to connect with so many incredible individuals across all levels of child support is inspiring. There's nothing more fulfilling than seeing the impact of our efforts reflected in the lives of the families we serve.

Christy Brahim

I've been in child support for over 23 years. During this time, I've never once been turned away when asking for assistance.

Whether it was a co-worker within the office, another worker across state lines, someone from another corporation, or a state partner, someone has always provided a helping hand. Each child support professional has a service nature and helpful demeanor. I'm grateful for you and the joy and partnership you bring to your organization every day. Thank you for all the hard work you do, and may you be blessed this holiday season.

Loretta Everett

I am deeply grateful for family, friends, and the gift of good health. I am also grateful to play a small role in an orchestra of child support professionals committed to helping families and improving the lives of children.

Verna Donnelly

I am forever grateful for family, health, and love – and even more grateful for the opportunity to provide for those who need.

Irene Halkias Curran

In a world that frequently operates at the pace of a swipe or a scroll, it is simple to become preoccupied with what we do not possess instead of focusing on what we do have. However, concealed in plain view is a subtle power that has the potential to enhance our mental, emotional, and even physical health: gratitude. Beyond being merely a courteous 'thank you,' gratitude represents a mindset – a conscious effort to recognize and value the goodness in life, whether significant or minor.

Tammy Pearson

Every day is a day of Thanksgiving. God's been so good to me, and every day I experience His blessings!

Tomiko Hicks

I am deeply grateful for all involved in the child support program - from frontline child support professionals, managers, directors, attorneys, and judges/magistrate/hearing officers, to federal partners, ERICSA and other associations' members, and the ERICSA Board. Your dedication changes lives every day. The work you do ensures that children receive not only support but hope and stability. Thank you for the compassion, integrity, and persistence you bring to every family you serve, whether directly or indirectly. Wishing you a season of rest, gratitude, and pride in the difference you make.

Margot Bean

I'm truly grateful for the ERICSA family. It's amazing how quickly time passes, yet every time we come together — whether for meetings, planning sessions, or the annual conference — it's a reminder of the joy of learning and the strength of lifelong friendships. ERICSA isn't just about the work we do in child support. It's about the camaraderie, the loyalty, and the way we lift one another as we face difficulties and successes within the child support community.

Timothy M. Cawoski

The best kind of friendships are fierce lady friendships where you aggressively believe in each other, defend each other, and think the other deserves the world. I am a firm believer that friendships are a necessary part of life — they fill parts of our souls no child, partner, or family member ever could. I am grateful for my circle of female friends; they are the best humans I know, and I learn so much from them. They have been a huge support over a difficult year just by being themselves. Through kindness, laughter, love, sass, snark, and an occasional figurative slap upside the head — collectively, they bring it all! Whether it's the bestie in my life since age 5, the BFF I met in 1987, my New Jersey girls, or my lovely ERICSA ladies, thank you for all that you bring to my life!

Rieda Abrams-Miller

I'd like to begin by expressing heartfelt gratitude to my supportive family. I'm also so appreciative of the opportunities the ERICSA community has given me to connect and collaborate with child support professionals across the country. It's truly an honor to serve on a Board with such dedicated individuals who are genuinely committed to supporting child support families and the professionals who serve them.

Petrina Travers

I am forever grateful for family, health, and love — and even more grateful for the opportunity to provide for those who need.

Irene Halkias Curran

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