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Stepping Stone Schools Model Service for All

by Dexter Lane

Rhonda Paver intended to work as a teacher when she and her family moved to Austin, Texas, in 1979. Right off, she needed to find child care for her three children. Unsatisfied with the many large and small operations she looked into, Rhonda visited one final small house. The child care provider, looking exhausted, said she simply couldn't go on in her business. Right then and there, drawing on her Alaskan family history of pioneering entrepreneurship, Rhonda decided she was going to build what she could not find. She and her family moved into that very building. The family lived on one side. On the other, Rhonda started an early care and education business with her three children, her nephew, and a neighbor's child. Thirty-seven years, 20 schools, tens of thousands of families, and over 75,000 well-educated children later, Rhonda is not slowing down one bit.

What is Rhonda's secret? Her goal in 1979 was to provide the best possible

care for her own and her neighbors' children. A continuing passion for providing high-quality care and education for children, with excellent customer service to their families, animates Rhonda. She notes, "The Stepping Stone School program focuses on the experience of the whole family. Everything we do — from the expert design of our buildings and curriculum to the selection of our nurturing staff members and implementation of our quality assurance program — is for the comfort and development of our children and the peace of mind of their parents."

What exactly does 'excellent customer service' mean, when it comes to a child care program? For children, it manifests as a customized in-depth curriculum, delivered by carefully chosen and developed teachers, in buildings designed to teach and inspire. For parents, it consists of frequent communication through daily web-based information, news-

letters, and invitations to participate in school activities with their child. Parents have an open invitation to visit their child's school anytime, and accompany classes on field trips if they would like. This relationship with parents further inspires trust, and is a valuable component of Stepping Stone School's commitment to customer service.

When Rhonda started her first school, she taught, cooked, cleaned, repaired what broke, and ran a business 14



Dex Lane, a freelance writer/photographer, specializes in stories, photographs, and issues involving children's connections with nature. Earlier work in ECE involved designing and implementing a project-

approach activity on an oil palm plantation in the Sumatran jungle. Through field trips, students studied all aspects of the plantation's many operations and documented their findings in words and artwork. "The Plantation Project" (in English/Indonesian) is free at www.dexterlane.com/plantationproject. Dex had what would today be called a 'free-range' childhood, and drew from his early years a passionate love of nature. He is deeply committed to The Nature Explore project's mission of connecting children with nature.



provide an appropriately stimulating environment for their developing motor skills, and even introduce American Sign Language. Security in their surroundings, engagement with caretakers and each other, and foundational development of motor and cognitive skills are goals for these infants.

children up to age 13 in afterschool and school-break programs. Two programs, the Future Leaders and Innovators™ afterschool program, and the School-age Summer Camp are based in The Brainery,™ a designated space for academic work. Although STEAM (Science, Technology, Engineering, Arts, and Mathematics) concepts are integrated into all age groups of the school's curriculum, they become increasingly focused in these spaces.

Maintaining high-quality education in family-friendly settings requires careful selection of teachers, followed by ongoing support. All staff, teachers, and administrators are students in Stepping Stone School University,™ a progressive program of continuous education developed in-house. This begins with a comprehensive orientation of workshops for new teachers. Teachers also receive ongoing training in age-specific curriculums and lesson planning throughout the rest of the year. Annually, conferences address issues of importance to the entire Stepping Stone School Community.

In Stepping Stone School programs, children are connected to their communities in many ways, ranging from field trips to charitable projects. Here, charitable activities aren't simply fundraising events, they are educational and ethical experiences for all involved. A recent project that raised \$10,000 for The Ronald McDonald House Charities of Central Texas is an excellent illustration.

During this year's Young Entrepreneurs & Philanthropists™ summer camp, students made and sold food and crafts. Yet this activity wasn't just stir, bake, make, and sell. Children formed teams, each with a specific function in the project. One team researched costs of materials for the food and crafts. Another team was involved in production. Yet another team created a marketing program for the sales. The

hours a day. As the business grew, she assembled a management team and intensified her efforts to ensure that the children received the highest quality of education and care she could provide. She attained her master's degree in child development from the University of Texas, and her own educational philosophy — along with counsel from an Educational Advisory Board — inform the continuous development of Stepping Stone School's curriculum.

In an age where following a preset curriculum is the path of least resistance, Stepping Stone School has developed its own comprehensive in-house educational program: Platinum Learning For Life.™ The curriculum incorporates life, relationship and safety skills, along with manners and values development, into developmentally appropriate academic programs. More than simply preparing young children for kindergarten, the curriculum addresses critical areas of their students' development.

Children from six weeks to five years are served in the school's core programs. The youngest, ages six weeks to 18 months, reside in the Early Childhood Developmental Nurturance Program.™ Caregivers respond to their vocalizations, identify objects they touch or see,

The child's developing capacity to communicate curiosity is addressed in the Developmental Preschool Program.™ Children from 18 months to three years begin to work with weekly theme-based lesson plans for both individual children and groups, concentrating on early literacy skills.

Children of three and four years are engaged in deepening levels of cognitive, social/emotional, motor development, and language programming. In the Kindergarten Readiness Program,™ self-care and nutrition skills development meets work in math and problem solving. Each child is supported in discovering his or her emerging individuality and is encouraged in many areas of self-expression.

The oldest children participate in the Advanced Kindergarten Readiness Program™ in which social/emotional, language, motor and cognitive skills are explored and strengthened as the child readies for public schooling. Important to this level is emphasis on developing the child's self-competence as a learner, and on strengthening character development.

In addition to a full spectrum of early education, Stepping Stone School serves

children created their own business, based on a standard business model.

The participating students developed and used academic skills, replicating real business activities found in the adult world, making and selling products, and giving all the profits away. This experiential learning, values development, teamwork, social skills building, and community involvement blended into a fun project. Far beyond merely connecting children with their communities, Stepping Stone Schools creates 'philanthropreneurs' connected ethically and morally in service to their communities.

Stepping Stone School is involved with giving back to the community in other ways, as well. Rhonda supports past students through an innovative college scholarship program. College-age graduates of the preschool program can apply for financial assistance. As with the philanthropreneur program, this scholarship involves effort and learning on the applicant's part. After completing paper work, the applicant has a face-to-face interview with Rhonda. Even after graduating from the preschool, students remain part of the Stepping Stone family.

As the school has grown in sophistication over the years, so, too, have its spaces. The older schools were purchased as existing buildings and remodeled. An in-house architect has designed the newer schools. He collaborates closely with Rhonda and other education specialists during the design process.

The Stepping Stone School of Ideas is an enchanting example. Its design incorporates architectural features, signage, artwork, and play features that support best practices in early childhood education. Even the entryway is inspirational. A model of Amelia Earhart's plane soars overhead

as you enter. Translucent artwork hangings depicting children as explorers, doctors, and scientists filter light through interior windows. Overhead, a large cloud-shaped cutout has been taken from the ceiling, exposing the ceiling joists. Children and families in this room are surrounded by inspiration, possibilities, stories, even information on how the school is built.

The School of Ideas features 15 classrooms, ranging from infant to school-age. They are arranged in age and developmental stage related clusters, each with its own play atrium. Each cluster is based on a developmental theme, such as "Brilliant Creators," and "World Champions." The latter, for three and four year olds who are developing their gross motor skills, features images of children playing sports. Boys and girls are equally represented as being capable athletes, scientists, and scholars on photos throughout the school.

The large main indoor play space in the School of Ideas speaks to discovery and storytelling. A quote from Christopher Columbus on the wall complements an abstract Santa Maria-inspired sailboat structure. Children are beckoned to play explorer in the boat, and with periscopes located along the wall. Columbus' two other ships sail in the rubber flooring, which also features a compass rose. High overhead, exposed trusses against the ceiling suggest the construction of a boat's hull. Floor, walls, the play structure, even the ceiling conveys a unified message of storytelling and discovery, again, designed specifically to inspire children and their families.

Stepping Stone School has 20 individual campuses in the Austin area, but the organization still has a small business feel. In part, this results from Rhonda and her administrative staff caring about details large and small. The sum of all parts reflects the school's commitment to excellence.

Stepping Stone School's success lies in its synergy between curriculum and growth. Innovative ideas are welcome in its child-centered academic programs. Sound business practices enable ongoing development of new campuses. Detailed attention, both to growing the child and to growing the school, is the rare balance Rhonda has achieved.

The values and heart that she brought to her first school, Rhonda blends with wisdom gained during her 37-year journey. Under her guidance, the large and growing Stepping Stone School provides very personalized experiences for the children, families, and community it serves.

