

Meet Cover Director Linda Vlautin The Child Garden — Reno, Nevada

When opportunity knocks, open the door. This axiom certainly applies to the career of Linda Vlautin. She has jumped at a number of opportunities that have taken her to wonderful and unexpected places.

Linda had no intention of pursuing a career in early childhood when, 30 years ago, she completed her degree in business administration. However, the job of assistant director at The Child Garden, located in a beautiful old house in downtown Reno, was the only job that would enable her to keep her preschool son with her at work. So she said *yes*. And three years later, when the opportunity presented itself, she purchased the center.

In 1984, a woman who was picking up her great grandchildren at the center happened to mention that she was selling her house. It turned out that this house was a small brick house that Linda drove by every day on the way to the center and had always coveted as a perfect children's environment. Linda immediately persuaded her to put other deals on hold to give her a chance to purchase the house. The house is now the home of a thriving kindergarten program.

Three years later, a local employer expressed interest in providing child care for its employees.

Linda found a parcel of available land in the business park and proposed to open the center if the employer would guarantee 50 slots. The employer agreed and Linda proceeded to open the center.

When the center was enrolling slowly, Linda went back to the employer and suggested that they take the money they were spending to pay for vacant slots and turn it into a subsidy to lower the fees for their employees. They agreed to this too; and, within a month, the center was full and has had a waiting list ever since.

The employer is so happy with this arrangement that they have contracted with Linda to design and operate a 200 child center near a new plant they are opening. Linda is designing the center.

With the opening of this new center, The Child Garden will be operating five centers serving over 600 children — the four centers in Reno and a small center in nearby Sparks.

As The Child Garden has grown, one of Linda's challenges has been to retain a sense of intimacy and familiarity for children, parents, and staff. She has used physical and organizational design to achieve this. She designs her centers for small group sizes and provides separate playgrounds for each age group. She also gives the directors at each center considerable autonomy so they feel strong ownership in making it a success.

Efforts such as these have clearly paid off in crafting warm, caring environments. A telling mark of success is the high number of graduates who bring their own children to The Child Garden to experience the loving care they remember. In addition, several graduates have chosen to come back as teachers.

A second challenge for Linda has been to maximize her talents. As the organization has grown, she has been able to hire and groom key people to whom she can delegate some of the day-to-day operational tasks that over the course of 30 years no longer excite her.

Much of Linda's time now is devoted to center design. Not only has she designed two of her own centers, but from time to time she designs centers for local employers. She takes pride in crafting overall center plans that build in plenty of opportunities for intimacy, but also in dreaming up (mostly in the middle of the night) creative enhancements to changing tables and teacher lounges that make the environment work better for everyone.

Watching Linda show off her centers, it is clear she loves her work. She admits that after 30 hectic years she still has no plans to retire. "I can't think of anything in the world that I would rather be doing."