

## Meet Cover Directors LaVelma and Tom Long

### Caring for Kids Southfield, Michigan

They may be new to center life, but they have a long history of working with young children. LaVelma and Tom Long have spent the last two years translating their skills as home child care providers into the management expertise needed to lead a center-based early childhood program.

They took their name, Caring for Kids, with them when they purchased the Perry-Kay Nursery School and Kindergarten in Southfield, Michigan, and began to make it their own. "It isn't easy to take over someone else's business," shares LaVelma. "The first year was really hectic." But the interactions taking place in the classrooms speak to their success.

LaVelma was working as a medical assistant when she decided that it was time to grow up and decide what she really wanted to be. "We had just adopted a three year old girl and were already parents of three boys. I wanted to be home with my children, so I decided to try child care. I went to an orientation and got my license to be a family day care provider, but I kept working in the medical profession.

"People started talking about how difficult it was for them to find child care for the late shift, 4 PM to midnight; and I began taking care of children during those hours, even to 3 AM, while working at Providence Hospital during the day. For four months, I worked around the clock. When people started asking for care during the day, I quit my hospital job and became a full time provider.

"Tom, a plumber running his own business, was the role model and inspiration for running my own business. I thought if he could do it, I could, too.

"The 24-hour caregiving schedule gradually phased itself out, and my program hours changed to 6 AM to 6 PM. Meanwhile, my license for group care for 12 children was approved, I hired an assistant, and developed my program. But I didn't want people to think of me just as a babysitter; I wanted them to see me as a professional,



Photographs by Bonnie Neugebauer

so I started going to conferences. I learned that I, too, could do a parent handbook and write up a parent contract. I began to see myself as a professional, running my own child care business."

Tom became more involved in the program when the house needed to be redesigned. Children began referring to him as "The Handyman," a role that has continued but expanded!

Encouraged by her family to get her degree, LaVelma went back to school part time to earn her degree in child development. At the same time, she became active in child care associations as a means of learning and networking. She joined the Oakland Community Child Care Association for family and group child care providers, the Oakland County 4-Cs, NAEYC, and the Michigan Providers Alliance — another organization for family and group providers which with LaVelma has reached out to include center directors — where she currently



Kay Koulouras was the featured cover director on our July 1986 issue.

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serves as vice president. MPA puts on a yearly state conference attended by 500 providers.

LaVelma dreamed of one day owning her own program, so when her licensing consultant brought news that Perry-Kay Nursery School and Kindergarten was on the market, LaVelma made the first appointment. "I had visited Perry-Kay before, and I loved it. I said that if I ever owned my own center I wanted it to be just like Perry-Kay."

After Tom visited the center, he too fell in love. "Kay and Perry have both been so generous with us. They still offer us advice and let us cry on their shoulders. Sometimes when we tell them a story, they come back with one that makes us feel like our situation is pretty easy."

The transition hasn't been a breeze. It isn't easy to step into the shoes of people who operated a successful program for 35 years and who are beloved in the child care community. But it's happening. The changes have been gradual, and some of the ideas have worked better than others. "We are both taking administration classes. The issues of working with staff are the toughest because they are the things we haven't had as much experience with. We know how to work with children, parents, and community; but working with one assistant is not at all like working with a staff of 12.

One of the traditions that follows the school is the involvement of extended family in the life of the program. When the Koulouras' ran the center, both sets of parents contributed daily to center life. The Longs, too, rely on their mothers, sisters, brothers, sons, and daughter as available to keep things rolling. Kay and Perry have moved on, the

Longs have taken up new challenges, but the commitment to family and the commitment to families and positive staff interactions is a legacy that lives on.

*Interview by Bonnie Neugebauer*