

Meet Helen J. Post-Brown, Director

Sunbeam Child Care Center, Fairmont, West Virginia

Wow!! How did this happen? Many a morning I look out my front window and see all these folks pulling into my driveway. Moms with toddlers, dads carrying babies, and grandparents bringing preschoolers to Sunbeam. In the fall of 1980 I started Sunbeam as a small preschool with 12 children. It was connected to the back of my home. I started with 12 families and now Sunbeam has over 80 families. I am like a lot of other child care directors: I have a small business that I have built up over the years while I am raising a family. Folks out in the working world do not always see us as a small business. We child care directors do not always think of ourselves as business people. We think of ourselves as teachers and caretakers and nurturers — and we are! But, we are also managers and leaders. It has taken me quite a few years to see myself in that light.

Sunbeam has evolved over the years to a fully licensed, nationally accredited child care center, licensed for 95 children with 25 employees. The center is still located in the residential area of Fairmont and is still connected to our home. We have been serving the community of Fairmont and neighboring cities for 25 years. Children of our first students are now attending Sunbeam.

The quality and success of my center has everything to do with the quality and talent of my staff. They are dedicated to early childhood education.

Each of them brings their own special talents to our center. Together we make Sunbeam a home away from home for our children and families.

When I became a licensed child care center I faced the obstacles many directors face when managing a child care business. I had experience in the classroom but lacked managerial experience. Besides learning how to set up an income and expense ledger and keeping up to date with licensing regulations, I also needed to develop skills as a manager and team leader. In my pursuit for improvement of my director's skills

I signed up to become an Apprentice for Child Development Specialist. This course and the many professional friendships that followed opened many doors for me.

In August of 1995 I took a course through Wheelock College called "The Human Side of Management." The class was taught by Holly Bruno and Margaret Copeland. The course was sponsored by Norma Gray, executive director of the River Valley Child Development Center. For five days over 40 child care directors from all over the state of West Virginia lived in the dormitories at Marshall University in Huntington, West Virginia. We were like sponges absorbing all of the information Holly and Margaret could throw at us and at night we stayed up late making plans for change for the children in West Virginia.

PHOTOGRAPHS BY BONNIE NEUGEBAUER



Norma Gray was a visionary for the children of West Virginia. Because of her vision, child care in West Virginia was never the same. A bond was formed that summer and many of us are still close friends today. We formed a group called Directors on a Mission and a few years later it evolved into West Virginia Childcare Centers United. This directors group has worked together to improve the quality of child care in West Virginia. Many of the directors pursued NAEYC accreditation, thus raising the bar for quality child care in West Virginia.

If an early childhood program is to grow in quality then they must work with others in the early childhood education field. Several years ago Sunbeam had the opportunity to collaborate with North Central WV Head Start. This collaboration has been very successful for Sunbeam and North Central Head Start. In the beginning we made sure the lines of communication were open. We held strategic planning meetings and continually touched base with each other to iron out any difficulties. Was it difficult? Yes. Did it work? Yes. Was it worth the extra time and effort? Very much so!! Because of our collaboration we are able to offer opportunities to our Sunbeam children and families that we could not offer before. Darla Porter-Wilson, North Central WV Family and Child Development Coordinator makes sure that all the children at Sunbeam are "Sunbeam children." When you walk into our classrooms you do not know which children get the extra Head Start resources and which do not.

I am president of West Virginia Childcare Centers United. This statewide organization of child care directors is "dedicated to improving the quality of child care in West Virginia." Our organization believes in promoting our mission statement through networking, advocacy, and education. We promise to support quality, affordability, and availability of child care in West Virginia. As



advocates for children we have learned that each of us in our own way can make a difference in children's lives. Many of us have joined the state group PIECES (Partners Implementing an Early Care & Education System for Children). This advisory group is trying to pull together the puzzle pieces of early childhood services in West Virginia to create a unified system of early care and education for West Virginia's children from birth to 5.

Some of our group members take an active part in their local communities, educating and advocating for children. All of our members belong to our listserv and receive information on a weekly basis from our lobbyist, Pat McGill, about issues in the state legislature. Yes, we have a lobbyist! Child care directors in a small state like West Virginia can afford a lobbyist because we have partnered with another group, West Virginia Association of Young Children (WVAYC). WVAYC shares the same issues as we do. Collaborating with them has enabled us to be a greater voice for children in West Virginia. Connie Stout, President of WVAYC and I attend workshops and conferences together. We also open our workshops and conferences to all of our members — WVCCU and WVAYC.

Through the past 4 years as president of WVCCU I have learned that it can take a small group of dedicated people to make a difference and each of us in our own way can truly make a difference. We can support groups such as WVCCU. We can work in our own community to make a difference. Not everyone has to travel to the state capitol. Our lobbyist informed us that, "Lawmakers need first-hand input from voters to make sound decisions. As few as 15-20 letters from constituents in a legislative district can impact the votes of undecided Legislators." When professional lobbyists argue against your interest, lawmakers can respond, "That's not what I hear from the people in my district." We, as constituents, can be the most effective lobbyists — whether we are writing letters, making phone calls, or meeting with our legislators. Sometimes you think you can't make a difference, but in West Virginia we have impacted change for children and families.

Check out
Grass Roots Lobbying Tips
online:
www.ChildCareExchange.com