



EduKids



Meet Nancy Ware, Day-Care Pioneer Who Founded EduKids

Nancy W. Ware had imagined a nurturing, education-based day care for a her youngest son – one run by certified teachers, in a safe, bright space with lots of natural light.

When she couldn't find such a place, she left her job to create it.

"We learned in business school, when you find a need, you fill it," she said. "And I had a need, and I knew I wasn't the only working mother with that need."

But Ware had no experience. She had been a human resources manager at a Budget Car Rental, and child care at that time was largely the domain of churches, which offered programs in their basements as a service, not a business.

"I was nervous leaving my job in HR because it was what I knew," she said. "I was excited about starting a new business because I understood all of the business aspects from experience and completing my MBA at Canisius. What I had to get up to speed on was the early childhood education side, so I surrounded myself with people who were experts in that."

She brought her childhood friend Kate Dust on board. Dust has a masters in early childhood education and was teaching supervisor of a Head Start program. The two mothers embarked on a center that would be ideal for their own children.

In 1989 Ware opened a 3,000-square-foot center of her dreams in a building in Orchard Park, and she called it EduKids.

"It really described the focus on education, especially since most centers in 1989 were custodial, not educational," she said. EduKids was anchored in business soundness and built around the research and tenets of the venerable National Association for the Education of Young Children, which also bestowed it with its prestigious accreditation.

"It was the beginning of a shift in child care from the church basements to facilities," Ware said.

Not only that. EduKids would go on to revolutionize center-based programs and establish standards for the business of child care in Western New York.

"It was a cutting-edge concept at the time to have an education-based center, and there weren't many for-profit providers," said Lynn Pullano, chief executive officer of the Child Care Resource Network in Buffalo. "It helped bring awareness that early childhood is such an important stage in a child's development, and that it's not so much about day care or baby-sitting but developing strategies and a curriculum focused on education."

With EduKids' business depth and professionalism, it also made child care a viable field, Pullano added.

"It raised the bar for the child care business, for child care centers to treat themselves as businesses," she said. "It put providers in a



business frame of mind – to be productive, have a good business structure and be sustainable."

SELECTED BY COMPANIES

It's been 25 years since the first EduKids center opened, and Ware has been validated in many ways.

EduKids is the area's largest day care business and is also one of the largest woman-owned businesses in Western New York. Ware's company has 13 nationally accredited centers with more than 1,800 children, ages 6 weeks to 12 years old, and 325 employees. And its programs are either near capacity or boast waiting lists. In 1999, Rich Products selected EduKids from a pool of finalists, including a leading international provider, to run its in-house child care program. It's the only area company operating a corporate program. And when Uniland Development Co. was developing CrossPoint, it asked EduKids to open a location in the Amherst business park.

"We thought EduKids was the perfect blend of high-quality early childhood education in a caring environment, and at the same time, they had the local connection to our community," said Maureen O. Hurley, executive vice president and chief administrative officer at Rich Products, who was on the committee that picked EduKids. "It's so important that our children are intellectually developed and cared for as if it were their parents taking care of them, and EduKids has delivered on that promise."

EARLY OBSTACLES

Ware herself has become a respected business leader and has been a board member for several organizations, including Evans Bank, Canisius College Board of Trustees and its Board of Regents. She's currently serving on the Buffalo Zoo Board of Directors and teaches in the Canisius entrepreneurship program.



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But when she opened her first location, she wasn't looking to create a trailblazing company or a child care empire. She just wanted to offer a quality program.

"I thought we would have one nice little child care center that was hopefully successful," she said, "but I didn't go into this thinking I'm going to build this empire, I was just hoping I'd be able to pay everyone."

It would be years before Ware would realize she made the right decision, as a business person. To start, the all-male Orchard Park Town Board dismissed her proposal, saying: "'Honey, it's a really nice idea, but the women in Orchard Park don't work, so why don't you just take your idea down the street,'" she recalled.

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Then a loan officer rejected her application for startup funding, saying "If you came back with your husband and put the application in his name, then we'd probably consider it."

To get the center going, Ware's husband's retirement fund, family's savings and "everything we had," was spent, she said.

"I didn't get paid until year three, and often we had to take money off charge cards to pay the staff and buy equipment," Ware said. "Good thing my husband had a good job."

Her first center opened in September 1989 with three kids, including her son, Charlie. By spring she had 20 kids, and when the center's first anniversary rolled around, that number had doubled.

"It turned out I wasn't the only one with the need; other people also wanted something better," Ware said.

HIGH COSTS

New York State is the least affordable state for child care, which includes center-based, family and group family programs.

Locally, parents on average spent \$8,300 per child last year. For infant care, it was even more, ranging from \$10,000 to \$13,000. But Pullano said "I have not yet come across one center that's rolling in the profits."

Despite the high costs to parents, providers incur a lot of hidden expenses, including insurance, equipment, training for employees.

"A lot of centers work on bare-bones budgets; it's quite an expensive venture to open a day care," she said.

At EduKids, workshops and other training programs are held monthly at the company's West Seneca headquarters. It's costly and comprehensive, covering all aspects of care needed not just to meet basic state regulations but for national accrediting.

"We have to do it because we are dealing with lives here; training is very important."

Personnel is the biggest expense, and turnover is rampant at center-based programs. Centers want certified teachers to boost the quality of their programs, but can't afford to pay them what school districts offer.

EduKids figured out a solution to that conundrum – payroll and benefits account for 65 percent of its budget, eliminating the high turnover rate. To celebrate its 25th anniversary, employees were given \$25 for each year of service. The company doled out \$30,000.

In addition to its dedicated staff, Ware credits timing to the success of the business.

"I think the timing was perfect for it," she said. "And we've had slow growth. Sometimes businesses fail because they grow too fast. But we didn't get to 13 centers in a few years, it took 25 years. And we were able to maintain quality with the slow growth."

MEETING A NEED

In 1989 mothers were entering the workforce in droves and the local child care community wasn't established.

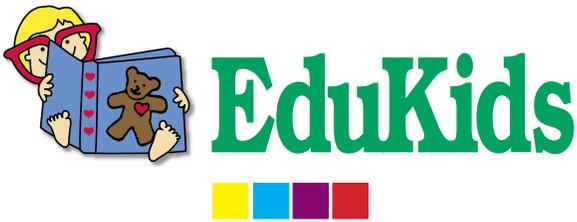
"I'm from that generation of women who were told you could go to college, have careers, break the glass ceiling and have families, but when we did those things, there was nowhere for us to take our kids," Ware said. "There was no foresight on that part."

It was this lack of child care that led to the 1988 founding of the Child Care Resource Network, which offers resources and referrals for providers and parents.

In 1990 Pullano, like Ware, had searched in vain for a program for her daughter.

"I had to work part-time; I couldn't return to work full-time because there was no quality programs where I lived," she said. While the highly regarded and nationally accredited Westminster Early Childhood Programs in Buffalo, along with other nonprofits, like the Jewish Community Center and YWCA, offered quality care, they were the outliers.

"What I found was completely custodial care in church basements, where the room dividers were actually coat racks or boxes; it was awful," Ware recalled.



Pullano said there was no established standard, “nothing you could trust across the board.”

EduKids’ marriage of the National Association for the Education of Young Children’s accreditation and Ware’s business sense set it apart, said Judy Piskun, an associate professor and director of internships at Villa Maria College, who also taught in the college’s early childhood education program.

While there’s a smattering of nationally accredited child care centers in Western New York, they are mainly single operations, geographically contained in one location.

From Lancaster to East Aurora, EduKids has been able to successfully meet the rigorous standards at 13 locations throughout the area.

“They were able to bring quality programs to all corners of the community,” Piskun said.

The accreditation, which is considered the gold standard among accrediting bodies, is voluntary and costly to adhere to. “You don’t get 13 out of 13 by chance, and it’s not a buy-one-get-one-free” said Kyle Snow, director of the Center for Applied Research at the National Association for the Education of Young Children in Washington, D.C. “It speaks to the group’s commitment to running high-quality programs.”

Dust, who became EduKid’s vice president of education and staff development, knew from her training and work experience that the “NAEYC’s standards and guidelines were the best way to teach, care for and support the development of children.”

Dust had the education aspect covered, and Ware’s husband, Don, who had worked in banking, joined the company in 1995 and took care of its finances, deciding when the company was ready to expand into other areas.

MORE TO COME

The company continues to grow. It has two locations in Buffalo and is actively looking for a third in the city, Ware said. This fall, EduKids will open a 15,000 square foot building in West Seneca, next to one of its centers, to house the company’s headquarters and training facility.

EduKids is now decades removed from the small center on South Lincoln Avenue where it all began in 1989. The company’s flagship center on North Buffalo Road in Orchard Park is set to open in the early fall. Dust and Ware’s own grandchildren are going to the centers. But with all the growth and changes, the company’s foundation has not changed.

“What we would want for your own children is still the filter we use,” Ware said. “We use it for every decision made, every training, every person hired. It is still very personal.”

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PROGRAMS

For kindergarten readiness or a quality daycare in Western New York, consider Edukids. We provide care for a range of childhood stages:

Infants (6w-18mo):

We provide your infant with a cozy room to sleep and play in, complemented by soothing music and plenty of love and affection.

Young Toddlers (18mo-2yr):

Your young explorer is provided with a rich language and motor skill environment in which to play and learn.

Older Toddlers (2yr-3yr):

We expand your child’s language, refine their social skills and promote their large motor activities, producing a fun-filled and engaging day.

Beginning Preschool (3yr-4yr):

Your child will explore, discover and learn how to associate and make connections.

Preschool (4yr-5yr):

This ideal kindergarten readiness program includes math, reading and science in addition to foreign language and computer exercises.

School Age (6yr-11yr):

Offering plenty of room and time for relaxation and play after your child’s primary school day as well as structured programs during holiday and calendar breaks.

Summer Camp (6yr-11yr):

A fun-filled summer program that includes many field trips and FUN adventures that your little camper will rave about.