

School follows Montessori, Christian principles

By The Gazette Staff

It's one thing to believe in your business.

It's another to believe it's a religious calling.

Pam Purcell and Mary Beth Gregory both feel strongly that God has led them to organize the Grace Montessori Academy. The private school combines Christian principles with the principles of the pioneering educator Maria Montessori, who believed students learn more from exploring their environment and from each other than from traditional textbooks.

"There are quite a few Christian-based Montessori schools across the country, but this is the only one in our area that we're aware of," said Gregory, who is president of the school's board of directors.

The school's "directress," Linda Hart, has been teaching Christian-based Montessori for more than 30 years and since moving back to Billings several years ago has been teaching in her home.

Now the school is expanding into its own building at 125 25th Street West. Volunteers have been busy painting and building shelves to get the school ready, said Gregory.

"We're on a 1-acre site and we're working on a playground," she said. "We'll plant a garden and have other activities outside. The outdoors is an important part of Montessori."

Gospel principles can be blended into the curriculum by telling Bible stories during story time, by using scriptures to learn phonetics, by celebrating faith through music and by acting out Bible stories.

"And we'll pray together," said Gregory.

Grace Montessori Academy can be reached at 652-1739 or through its Web site, www.gmamt.org. Here's what else the founders had to say about the school and the challenges of expanding the nonprofit business:

What is the nature of your business?

Grace Montessori Academy is a new Montessori school in Billings that will reflect the academic and experiential learning process developed by Dr. Maria Montessori and be enhanced by a Christian foundation. Our program is unique in that it is the only nonprofit Christian Montessori school in this region. Our program will consist of an early childhood program for children ages 3 to 6 years old with an all-day kindergarten and a lower elementary program for children ages 6 to 9 years old. We will plan to expand into the upper elementary (9 to 12 years old) as the program grows.

Why did you start this business?

GMA is a small, grass-roots effort of committed parents and community members who believe the Montessori method is an effective and successful alternative to educating children. We wanted to be able to offer this educational choice to families in Billings and the outlying areas.

Where did startup funding come from?

All of our startup money came from our board members and committed parents who are passionate about the vision we have for this school.

How long have you been in business?

We have been developing our vision and mission for over a year now. Our school will begin in August. We are accepting applications for enrollment at this time. We encourage people to call or visit our Web site for more information.

What are the biggest challenges in running the business?

At this stage of our business, the biggest challenge was finding the right location for our school. We had pretty strict requirements, not only for the inside of our building but also for a safe exterior play area for the children.

What is being done to expand the business?

We have just moved into our new site. There has been a tremendous effort by dedicated volunteers in painting walls and building materials to outfit the classrooms. We would not be able to succeed if it weren't for this volunteer effort.

Your worst business mistake?

As the old marketing adage says, location is key. We realized our market did expect us to be more centrally located. As a result, it took us longer to get started.

What advice do you have for someone running a business?

Perseverance. We have faced several challenges in the process of starting this school and will continue to as we grow. It is because of our faith and perseverance that we stayed on course and never strayed from the principles we have set forth. If you stay focused and true to your mission, everything is viewed with much better perspective.

How many workers do you employ?

GMA has two full-time AMS Montessori-certified teachers. Because we are a small school at this time, the administrative responsibilities are being fulfilled by board members.

What is your five-year plan for the business?

It is the vision of our school to provide educational opportunities to as many children as we can. We are developing two strategies to accomplish this. First, we hope to begin development of an endowment fund that will help fund scholarships for families in need. Second, we plan to offer multiple early-childhood sites in different parts of Billings and the surrounding areas. As for our new location, we look forward to the continued growth of our main school that will, at its capacity, consist of the early childhood, lower and upper elementary programs. During this time of growth, we will strive to become an accredited AMS. We firmly believe that this accreditation lends increased professionalism and credibility to our program.

What question would you ask other entrepreneurs?

To buy or lease? We have gone back and forth on this issue.

If you weren't doing what you are now, what would your dream job be?

We both feel this is where we have been called to serve at this time.

"Entrepreneurs" appears regularly in the WorkWeek section. The feature will help readers become familiar with new businesses, as well as educate others in the challenges of starting a business. If you have been in business for at least one year and would like to tell your story, please contact: Chris Jorgensen

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