



Susan Leger Ferraro

Chief Executive Officer of Little Sprouts,
and Founder and Chief Curiosity Officer
of the Leadership & Literacy Foundation

By Charlene Peters

Photos by John Lawler

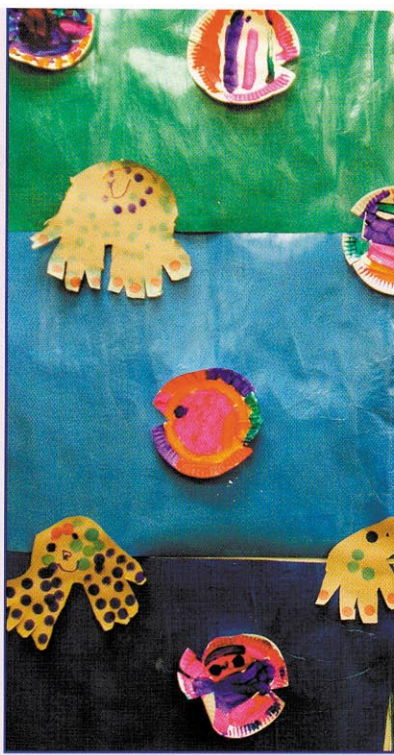


Dozens of dandelion plumes take flight in a passing breeze, through a gated playground where teachers interact with toddlers who climb structures and play tag. Unlike the seeds gliding aimlessly through the air, the children who participate in the inspirational programs created by Susan Ferraro are guided in their journeys through life thanks to Ferraro's innovation and dedication to the many organizations she has founded.

Ferraro, who began her career as a daycare provider, developed an educational philosophy based on the desire for a more balanced environment for children. Since the time she was in kindergarten, Ferraro clearly remembers an awareness of educators who talked down to students, rather than inspired them. In her teen years, discovering that her stable family wasn't the norm shocked her. She realized, "I didn't need food stamps to eat every day, and I didn't have to worry about my father drinking too much. It made me think of how others were living."

Susan took action and spent two summers as a volunteer tour guide for underprivileged kids at the Museum of Science Eye Opener Program, and signed up for childhood education classes and work-study programs in high school. Upon graduation she obtained her daycare license for six children, and in 1993, her vision and charisma landed Little Sprouts in Valley Office Park as the first corporate childcare center in Methuen.

Over the past 23 years, Susan has implemented several wellness-based programs in the Merrimack region, one of which is the Little Sprouts Child Enrichment Center & Big Sprouts School Age Program, which was recently listed as one of the Top 50 Child Care Business Centers in the nation. In addition to providing discounted daycare and after school programs in the Merrimack community for children aged one month through 14 years, the Center provides services such as training in First Aid and CPR; development of communication skills; parenting skills for teachers, families, and community members; free on site chair



massage; meditation trainings and physical fitness and nutrition consultations.

Ferraro also set out to establish summer camp programs for kids. Her Blooming Sprouts Summer Camp for children ages 5 and 6 years old are age-appropriately designed for smaller groups in a nurturing environment. Once children blossom into a Big Sprout (up to 12 years old), camp activities include hiking on Kenoza Lake Carriage Roads in Haverhill; weekly field trips to the Children's Museum of Boston and IMAX Theater, Fenway Park and the New England Aquarium; sports activities such as track, softball and baseball; arts and crafts; community service projects, and cultural music events. Graduates of Big Sprouts (14 to 16 years old) are even given the opportunity to learn leadership skills at Ferraro's Counselor-in-Training Program.

Empathy for at-risk families, along with a driving desire to create change, influenced Susan's facilitation of additional programs based on emotional, physical, and social health. "When I looked at the educators and the families I was working with, I realized they needed balance, a way to connect and slow down their days, minds and spirits," says Susan. Her response to at-risk families was to incorporate non-profit programs for parents and children that include the Leadership & Literacy Foundation and Project STRIVE. As the sister company of Little Sprouts, the Leadership & Literacy Foundation is housed under the same roof and offers training, workshops, book giveaways, and other literacy-oriented programs. In 2003, the Foundation was recognized with a \$1.5 million grant from Early Reading First, to provide improved literacy support for students, parents, and teachers throughout the nation.

In response to high school dropouts, Ferraro's Project STRIVE was added to the Foundation in 1998, offering a GED and leadership program for at-risk youths in the Greater Merrimack Valley. (According to the Massachusetts Department of Education, 9,389 ninth-through twelfth-graders dropped out of school in 2002-3, 967 more than the previous year.) Project STRIVE teens graduate with one fulfilled college course and access to financial aid, housing, counseling, and physical fitness services. The tax-deductible cost

to sponsor a student in the full year, Monday-Friday, 20-hour-per-week program, is \$4,899.

In 2004, the YWCA recognized Susan's efforts by presenting the Tribute to Woman of the Year Award, and during the same year, the Commonwealth Corporation in Boston recognized her with the Business Partnership of the Year Award. "I've never been a conventional person," Susan admits. "When I tip the hat a bit and push the edge – it's typical."

As a single parent to three college-aged sons, Susan shows no evidence of burnout, perhaps due to a holistic lifestyle which includes daily meditation, weight training, running, eating well, and reading voraciously. She's a certified teacher of Deepak Chopra's Creating Health Program, a yoga practitioner, and facilitator for Franklin Covey's, *7 Habits of Highly Effective Teens*, *7 Habits of Highly Effective Families*, *What Matters Most*, and *Thinking Win/Win*, where she integrates conflict resolution skills, spiritual awareness, self-esteem, and building healthy relationships as part of the program's curriculum.

Susan is currently working with Chief Operating Officer and Harvard MBA, Karen Baldeschwieler, developing the Economic Revitalization Project in Lawrence, where yards of abandoned mill space – formerly a crime zone – will be transformed into IMAJINethat, an indoor, interactive children's play space. In another section of the mill, a children's museum project will feature rain forest and dinosaur crawl structures, sand and water rooms, farm space, and rock climbing walls.

When Susan says, "If we pay attention to our internal energy and wisdom, we'll be headed for some great journeys," she speaks for all of those who have been touched by her remarkable accomplishments.

For more information on Susan Leger Ferraro's endeavors, visit www.leadershipandliteracy.org or www.littlesprouts.com.