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PEOPLE, PLACES AND STRUGGLES: THE PRICELESS CARE OF OUR CHILDREN

By AMY LANE

In the small community of Marion, finding child care has sometimes meant traveling far to the nearest large town – if any slots are available.

Kristin Andrews' just-opened child care center, housed in the Marion Elementary School, offers some help.

Andrews answered a call put out by Marion Public Schools for child care providers and is adding the new operation to her already-busy life running Blue Fish Early Learning Center in Kalkaska. In Marion, Blue Fish has two classrooms and will start with about 10 pre-school children and 8 infants/ toddlers, operating early morning to after-school.

It's an opportunity to provide a needed child care option for families in the community, Andrews said, and a financially attractive move enabling her to pay competitive wages to the program director, lead teacher and assistant that she's hired and to also raise pay for her 17 employees in Kalkaska.

"The opportunity that we had at Marion, it was not really something that we could pass up," Andrews said. And she added: "We've definitely been warm-welcomed there."

At a time when many child care providers closed during the pandemic and never reopened – and those that are open may house long waiting lists – there's heightened attention to the importance and challenges of a sector underpinning society and economy, in northern Michigan and beyond.

Child care providers have been among those aided by Venture North Funding & Development, through consulting, loans, or Regional Resiliency Program grants that helped small businesses survive the pandemic and rebound.

Run by owners passionate about helping children, families and



communities, the businesses educate and care for young ones in their most critical phase of development, operating many times on thin margins and challenged to find staff – and even public acknowledgement – of the significance of the work that they do.

"I think that the pandemic has shone a spotlight on them," said Mary Manner, co-coordinator of the Great Start Collaborative of Traverse Bay, the region's early childhood initiative. "It made people have to confront that reality, that child care is an essential part of our economy. Because without child care, people can't go to work. Or if they do go to work, they have cobbled together some system of care that is not in the best interest of the child."

GROWTH CAN COME AT A PRICE

For Beth Fryer, owner of three-location Teddy Bear Daycare & Preschool LLC, child care has been part of her life since opening in her home 37 years ago. She operated alone for several years, then added an employee and became a



Colorful Interior of Bluefish Early Learning Center in Kalkaska

group home with six and then 12 children. “And from there we just grew,” Fryer said, incorporating from the start a nature-based curriculum that harkens back to Beth’s upbringing in Grand Rapids spending time in the woods.

Daughter-in-law Anna Fryer joined Beth and they expanded their Bass Lake location about five years ago to become a child care center licensed for 20. And from there, they then “found opportunities or opportunities found us, to expand, because of the popularity of our nature-based preschool,” Beth Fryer said.

Approached by Great Start’s Manner about the need for child care in the area, Fryer purchased a child care business on 14th Street in Traverse City and in June 2017 it became Teddy Bear’s second location, with a third location opening in May 2018 on Long Lake.

Growth came with a price: Lease payments of about \$4,200 monthly at each of the two new locations, eating at business income. Anna Fryer, multisite director, said about 75 percent of what the center brings in goes to staffing and wages, with the remaining 25 percent going to lease payments, utilities, food for the children and anything else that’s needed, including repaying a loan that financed startup of the two new locations.

Teddy Bear has about 36 employees between the three centers and has raised wages to retain staff, but has had to charge more and “cut corners really closely,” Anna Fryer said. It’s a balancing act and budgeting challenge, daily.

“I’ve been the owner since the beginning, and I’ve got to say that if it wasn’t for the people I’m surrounded with,” the love for children and wanting to do something for the community, “I wouldn’t have survived,” Beth Fryer said. “It’s not a money-maker, it’s a labor of love.”

All Teddy Bear’s spots for children -- 20 at Bass Lake, 51 at Long Lake and 74 at 14th Street – are full and they have 209 children on a wait list, 95 percent of which are under age two and a half. And families seek spots far before they’re needed.

“We had a mom say I’m getting married, and we are looking to conceive a child...we want to get on your wait list,” said Anna Fryer. “People are actually doing that.”

Beyond day-to-day challenges, came the pandemic. Teddy Bear closed in March 2020 and when it reopened in May, a state grant it received required it to hold child care slots for families without charging them. That continued through the end of the year.

“People were choosing to keep their children home,” said Anna Fryer. “We were unable to put children in that spot, were unable to staff for it, and so then you’re paying staff and not receiving money.”

During the pandemic, a \$3,800 Regional Resiliency Program grant from Venture North helped Teddy Bear purchase personal protective equipment, extra materials for children to minimize germ transmission, and supplies like thermometers and gloves. “And boy were we thankful” for the grant, Anna Fryer said.

She said there are continuing needs financially and otherwise – like the public “understanding and respecting what we do” -- but also rewards. “It’s making a difference in the life of a child. That’s why we are here. We do it because of the passion that we have.”

Beth Fryer said the profession offers the opportunity “to see miracles every day” and she values the years that they are able to give children “a healthy start to their world.” And there’s a continuum; several of her Bass Lake clients were children she cared for early-on. “It’s been a beautiful circle of life,” she said.

WAGES AND TUITION: AN ONGOING CHALLENGE

Great Start’s Manner said early childhood education “sets up people’s trajectory for a lifetime.” But despite that value, people don’t think of child care as a sector or talk about it in economic or business terms, she said. And while it needs to be elevated as a profession, that’s complicated by providers’ ability to pay wages that are commensurate with the credentialing and quality that’s desired.

“To a person, all of the providers that I know wish that they were paying their staff more, providing better benefits,” Manner said.

A snapshot of early childhood workforce in Michigan by the Center for the Study of Child Care Employment at the University of California, Berkeley, reports the median hourly wage for child care workers in 2019, pre-pandemic, was \$11.13. Next came a preschool teacher at \$14.89, and a preschool or child care center director at \$21.70. Kindergarten teachers came in at \$34.08, and elementary teachers, at \$38.09. The center conducts research and policy analysis about the characteristics of those who care for and educate young children, including state-by-state workforce data.

In northwest lower Michigan, May 2020 occupational employment and wage estimates from the U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics place child care workers with a median hourly wage of \$13.18. But locally, some have raised wages well beyond that to compete with pay offered by labor-hungry employers like fast-food businesses.

There's also the issue of disparity between what child care providers collect in tuition and what it costs them per child to provide care. A local look at that gap arose out of November/December 2019 discussions Manner had with several area child care centers, asking them to do some analysis.

"Across the board, they all said that they were charging between 50 and 60 percent of what it is actually costing them to provide care, for kids birth to five," Manner said. To make up the difference, centers were doing things like offering summer camps and/or fundraising to support scholarships "so that families who can't afford to pay the full tuition can still come," she said.

"Pretty much all providers are in the same boat, when it comes to...they aren't charging enough, and families can't afford to pay more. That's the fundamental thing."

A PROMISING PROGRAM MAY MAKE THINGS EASIER

A pilot program rolling out in northwest lower Michigan and two other areas of the state could provide some financial help. The MI Tri-Share program splits the cost of child care between the state, employees and their employer – an initiative that could help employers retain workers and also help ensure providers get fully paid for their services, Manner said.

"In early childhood, a family might get behind on their child care costs. So providers carry a lot of debt. One of the things this Tri-Share will do is ensure that providers get paid," she said.

The United Way of Northwest Michigan is administering the program locally in partnership with Great Start Collaborative and 5toONE. The state's share of funding comes from \$1

million appropriated in the fiscal 2021 state budget, up to \$300,000 of which is available to northwest Michigan, Manner said.

At Building Blocks Preschool and Child Development Center in Traverse City, growth has been steady since the business launched in May 2012, said director Amy Mayersky. Mayersky, who co-owns the business with Chelsea Foster, said they have more than doubled the five to seven children per classroom they first cared for when they took over the operation from a previous owner, and are at capacity for their staff of themselves and two other employees. They have 15 children on a waiting list.

"We absolutely adore the staff we have, and they are extremely loyal," Mayersky said. "But it is difficult to find additional quality staff, to be able to take more children." The center is licensed for 31 children.

When the pandemic struck, Building Blocks received an initial \$3,500 grant from Venture North's Regional Resiliency Program that helped with utilities, higher cleaning costs, supplies and other expenses. A second \$5,000 RRP grant helped with mortgage payments and other items. "It has been quite helpful to have," Mayersky said.



A Shaded Play Area Outside Bluefish Early Learning Center

She said she and Foster have talked about expanding and being able to help more families, and the two "love what we do. We get to help shape little minds and mold little people, essentially," Mayersky said. "We stay in contact with almost every family, and we get to watch the kids grow and go on to become great humans."

For Blue Fish Early Learning Center's Andrews, support of family, faith and now two teams of employees help make running two locations, three counties apart, possible. The Kalkaska center, opened in 2019 with the help of \$25,000 lent by Venture North, has grown from slots for 48 children to 118, with some waiting lists a year long. Andrews said she promoted one of her Kalkaska employees to be an assistant director, freeing her up more to add Marion to her focus.

Marion Public Schools Superintendent Steve Brimmer said the district put out an anonymous survey to the community to assess the need for a day care, “received a strong response” and “decided that we definitely needed to move forward and try to get it set up.”

Andrews said Marion citizens sometimes travel 35 to 45 minutes for child care, yet one more illustration of the child care shortage in northern Michigan. Said Brimmer: “A drive to Cadillac or Harrison, or any other town that may have day care, is not very practical for families so this should be beneficial. We are very happy to be able to help provide a service that the families in Marion need.”

COMMUNITY IMPACT

In Kingsley, a desire to help a community with limited options for quality child care brought Jamie Cramer to purchase Pitter Patter Preschool & Childcare two years ago, and the business has now expanded to a second location that opened in July.

Both Kingsley locations have 28 children apiece, although Cramer said the new location could go up to 42 if she were able to hire two more staff members, which is difficult. In trying to find employees, she said some people are concerned about their health and averse to the exposure presented working with numerous families and children. Others have told her they were waiting for their unemployment benefits to run out, “and then you have some people who want to make more than I can offer,” Cramer said. She currently has 13 employees.

“Child care desperately needs money directly into the hands of providers, so we can put that directly into our staff,” Cramer said. And, she added, child care needs respect.

“I hear so many times my teachers being referred to as babysitters, and that’s just a shame. It takes away from what these ladies do. Half the staff have college degrees.”

Cramer said Pitter Patter has had families on wait lists since before their child was born, as well as others who started contacting her a year ago when they learned she would be opening a second location.

It’s a challenging business, she said.

“It’s really, really hard to do child care. A lot of people see the expenses, the child care costs, and they don’t understand the back end of it, it is a very labor-heavy field. You have also your lease or mortgage, have liability insurance, your utilities, and if you’re doing it right, you’re putting money back into your business,” Cramer said. “We had just gotten to the point when we were in the black, when COVID hit.”



The pandemic exposed how underappreciated – and broken – the nation’s child care system is, shattering the idea that child care is “everybody’s private challenge to navigate,” said Melissa Boteach, vice president for income security and child care for the National Women’s Law Center.

Laura Santhanam, PBS.org

Pitter Patter stayed open during the pandemic, helped by funds including a loan from Cramer’s husband’s 401(k) and a \$4,000 grant from the Regional Resiliency Program, used for payroll. Enrollment dropped briefly and then shifted to children of essential workers – firefighters, police, nurses, other medical personnel, grocery employees and others.

Cramer, who now lives in Pennsylvania and travels monthly to Kingsley to meet with staff, said Pitter Patter has sought to have a community impact beyond child care. It joins weekly with The Father Fred Foundation to distribute food to families, partners with other organizations like Boots for Kids, Toys for Tots and the Grand Traverse Baby Pantry, and gives school supplies not only to Pitter Patter children entering elementary school but also their siblings, Cramer said.

“If a family has their needs met, if they have less stresses, they are better able to focus on their families and their children. That’s my biggest point of pride, is the community pieces we’ve been able to bring in, and fill the needs of families,” she said. “We want to be the change. That’s my goal, and that’s the staff’s goal.”

Amy Lane is a veteran Michigan business reporter whose background includes work with Crain Communications Inc., Crain’s Detroit Business and serving as Capitol correspondent for nearly 25 years. Now a freelance reporter and journalist, Lane’s work has appeared in many publications including Traverse City Business News.

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