

LEADERS' *Lagniappe*



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Early Childhood Excellence:

Early Childhood Director and Willing Corporate Partner to Increase Access to High-Quality Early Care and Education

Kids of Excellence owner/director Kristi Givens of New Orleans recently found herself in a unique partnership opportunity, increasing children and family's access to high-quality early care and education. In this edition of *Leaders Lagniappe*, Kristi humbly shares how **Desire Street Ministries** (DSM) approached her to open a new program in a community center and how this new partnership is changing lives.

DSM was opening a community center that would offer physical and mental health care services, immunizations, literacy programs, and family events in the Desire neighborhood of New Orleans. The Atlanta-based group quickly realized that the vision would not meet the community's needs without an early learning center. They decided to identify a potential partner to lead this offering in an interesting way—by asking local families with young children what early learning center was the best. Each family that was asked stated, "Kids of Excellence."



Kristi Givens
DIRECTOR & OWNER,
KIDS OF EXCELLENCE

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DSM reached out to Kristi and let her know that they wanted to truly transform this community with a slate of services for children and families. The proof was in how they engaged her throughout the partnership. Kristi shared, "DSM was well-resourced and flew me out to meet them. But most importantly, they treated me as an equal. They helped me to become better because they valued me. I was involved in all the processes of design. My perspective was very important." They worked closely with her to design the physical plant, spending \$1.2 million for a 10,000 square foot build, and \$150,000 to furnish classrooms, ultimately serving 54 children with a 1-to-4 teacher to child ratio. With the encouragement of her supportive husband, Kristi was excited to run the state-of-the-art center nested within many other community offerings, with minimal rent, maintenance, and low overhead locked in.

Kristi shared, "Once we opened, things didn't go as smoothly as we had planned," and she was concerned. The configuration of the ceilings and the air conditioning units resulted in exorbitant utility costs. DSM stepped in, sending a group of engineers who reconfigured the building, reducing these costs by 18 percent. After Kristi brought costs under control, she was able to increase quality across both of her centers, thus increasing salaries, offering health insurance, and reducing teacher-turnover. This couldn't be possible without the partnership.

Teachers work across the two locations to improve their practices. By observing each other in action, the teachers learn from each other and share their strengths. Teachers return from these visits energized, with a newfound understanding of how they can improve. "After one observation, my teachers came back excited, saying, 'I know what I'm missing,' and made adjustments to circle time and learning centers. Being co-located with other services has great value for families. When a child is sick, the family walks right next door for health care. Or a family might learn about an evening literacy program at the community center, and get involved. "I see my families thriving, and there is no better feeling. This is my life's mission. Every child deserves these opportunities," shared Kristi.

Now Kristi is planning to extend this impact so that **more families can access high-quality care**. A veteran educator and social worker of over thirty years, Kristi wants to serve more children through partnerships with corporations by offering on-site child care. **With two thirds of Louisiana's children birth to five having a parent in the workforce**, Kristi feels like she can help address this challenge. She is seeking partners who have employees with young children. "I know having quality child care is key to businesses keeping their employees, and it's good for families, who are more productive at work." With a smaller footprint than her partnership with DSM, Kristi is looking for businesses with one or two rooms that could be converted to classrooms, where she can provide qualified teachers and high-quality care and education.

Kristi is excited for the opportunities in the early childhood landscape. "In all my years in education, this is the best I've seen of the field, in these recent years. Birth to five is the most important time for children, and now there are funding streams that are prioritizing them. Between **New Orleans' City Seats**, Head Start, Early Head Start, and partnerships, providers like me are braiding funding to pay teachers well and to provide the highest of quality to Louisiana's children."

Visit the Department's **Early Childhood** page to learn more.

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Did you learn something helpful or want to connect with Kristi?

Contact emmy.odwyer@la.gov.

