



LEARNING KITS HELP PARENTS TEACH DURING SCHOOL CLOSURE

By Cynthia King, for the Washington SBDC

ELLENSBURG, Wash. – Nurturing young children and their community of families has been a calling for Melissa Gillaspay since at least 2008, when she and her husband, Jacob, “fell in love with and remodeled” a charming building in a pastoral setting into Jack and Jill’s House Preschool. But when the Covid-19 pandemic closed the school in March 2020, she wasn’t sure how she or her community would continue.

“It was a challenge to survive financially, both for her family and her business,” recalled Liz Jamieson, certified business advisor with the Washington Small Business Development Center (SBDC) centers in Kittitas County. Gillaspay contacted the SBDC in Cle Elum in fall 2020 for assistance.

The Washington SBDC is a network of more than 35 advisors in more than two dozen communities across the state working to help owners and entrepreneurs who want to start, grow or buy/sell a business. Advising is confidential and is provided at no cost to the client through a partnership between the U.S. Small Business Administration and Washington State University. The Kittitas County Chamber of Commerce provides funding support to the

SBDC centers in Cle Elum and Ellensburg.

To generate income and assist former preschool families desperate for meaningful learning activities for their now-homeschooling children, Gillaspay began assembling and selling monthly themed learning kits. At \$50 each, the first batch of 25 in August 2020 sold out in 48 hours. Another 25 sold in a week. She had obviously found a profitable niche of service to her community, but she also realized that purchasing, assembling, marketing and selling comprised “a whole different business model that I had no experience in.”

Educator learns anew to adapt, survive, thrive

“Liz became an amazing resource,” Gillaspay said. “She was diligent to learn about me and my business in order to address my needs. Before, I never had to buy wholesale or charge sales tax. She helped me form a cash flow plan and directed me to appropriate training provided online by the Washington SBDC. She provided lists of local people for me to consider for tasks like copyrighting my kits, designing



Melissa Gillaspay, owner of Jack and Jill's House Preschool, with her family

a logo, building an e-commerce website – and helped me formulate what to ask them, when I didn’t really know what I needed.”

Jamieson also guided Gillaspay in acquiring three pandemic economic stimulus grants and a second Paycheck Protection Program (PPP) loan: “That was huge for us,” Gillaspay said. “I was able to change my business model, adapt my business, buy materials for my learning kits that I also can use in the preschool, and hire or rehire employees.”

Preschool nears capacity as learning-kit spaces expand

Jack and Jill’s House Preschool reopened in October 2020, but only two days a week and at 25 percent capacity. As Covid restrictions ease, Gillaspay is making up for lost income via

themed preschool summer camps held a few mornings each week. Two students from nearby Central Washington University work part-time with the summer camps.

She is selling learning kits at the Suncadia resort's Sunday market near Roslyn, Wash., and through that has been invited to special sales events coming this fall. Plans are for the e-commerce website to be open for orders in early fall.

Of two part-time employees laid off from the preschool due to Covid, one position has been

hired back for the fall. Though not quite at the 40 students ages 3-5 that she had pre-pandemic, the fall 2021 attendance forecast looks strong, Gillaspay said: "I am content with where

we are, to stick with a maximum of 40 students in the preschool. If I found the right long-term employee, though, I might see us growing in the future."

The learning kit business, however, is definitely growing. With profits, Gillaspay plans to purchase a shed to house materials for kit components. Her office is in her home, and the kitchen accommodates a monthly kit assembly line on which she

and her three children work. Once lumber prices go down, her family intends to build a shop that will include one bay for the kit production assembly line.

A model of perseverance for family, community

"As the kit business grows, I want to have the framework to support that growth," Gillaspay said. Toward that end, she continues to meet regularly with Jamieson: "I need

"I can't say enough in praise of Liz and the help I received from the SBDC. I created and built my preschool on my own, with no business expertise. But when Covid hit, I felt isolated; I knew I had to adjust and adapt. Liz is an amazing and knowledgeable resource. She really took the time to get to know me and my business so she could provide assistance."

- Melissa Gillaspay, owner
Jack and Jill's House Preschool

Many of these mothers benefit from the extra income while also being able to bring their children to the worksite – whether preschool or kit assembly. Some barter their time for Gillaspay's services.

"She wants to support other moms in our community," Jamieson said of Gillaspay. "She has kids at home, and is trying to juggle her own family while pursuing her business."



Student enjoying learning kit

"We are thankful to be in a spot now where we're strong and healthy, and it's a blessing to help others in this way," Gillaspay said. "It has been rough. But it has been good for our own kids to witness our struggle, see us think outside the box, and realize that something so rewarding can come out of something really challenging."



CONTACT INFORMATION:

Liz Jamieson
Certified Business Advisor
Washington SBDC at Cle Elum
833-492-7232
Liz.Jamieson@wsbdc.org



The Washington SBDC network, hosted by Washington State University, is an accredited member of America's SBDC. Funded in part through a cooperative agreement with the U.S. Small Business Administration, institutions of higher education, economic development organizations and other public and private funding partners.



www.WSBDC.org

