

Sunshine Kids Childcare Center celebrates 30 years

By Michele Gillis

When you drop off your child at a daycare, you are dropping off your heart.

Kimberly Peroni, president of Sunshine Kids Child Care Center, has made it her life goal to always treat the children in her daycare as if they were her own.

"When they drop their child off, I want them to be able to walk out that door and know what kind of care their child will be receiving," said Peroni. "We try to maintain the best staff we can. To be the best, you have to hire the best. They are in the safest environment they can be in."

She opened her first location in McMurray 30 years ago.

"I had a daughter, so I wanted to make sure she was in a safe environment," said Peroni. "You always worry about where she is and what is going on. My degree was in early elementary education, so I decided that I was going to try this on my own."

Peroni rented a space in McMurray and opened Sunshine Kids in May 1995.

Initially, it was her daughter and the two children of an employee at the daycare. The center was only licensed for 20 children, so when it reached maximum capacity, they expanded that location.

A few years later, she found a second location in Eighty Four, but it needed some work.

"My goal was to have two locations before I was 30," said Peroni. "I purchased a building and renovated it, and we opened two days before my 30th birthday. We opened the Eighty Four location in May 1999."

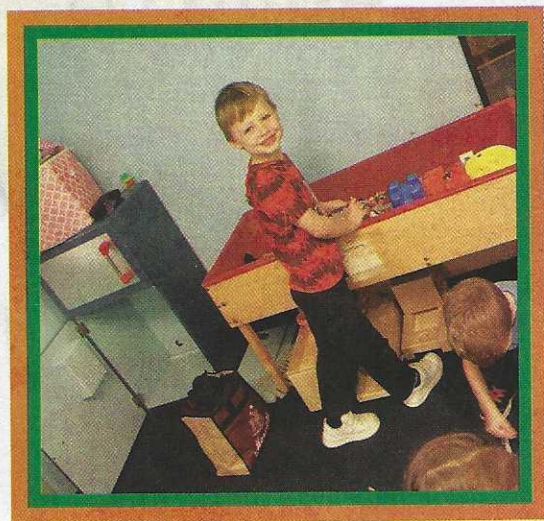
The third location in Finleyville was already a daycare, so she purchased it, rebranded it and opened it in 2008.

Tammy Main, operations manager of Sunshine Kids, has been with the company for 21 years and oversees operations at all three locations.

Peroni has moved away, but she and Main communicate every day, and she visits about four times a year.

In addition to handling the day-to-day operations, Main is also the director for the McMurray location.

"I greet the parents, do the schedules, handle tuition and do whatever I need to do to make sure the center is running smoothly," said Main. "As far as the company as a whole, I can't say enough that Kim has trusted me with her baby. I started 21 years ago as a teacher's aide and worked my way up."



PHOTOS COURTESY OF SUNSHINE KIDS

She has put so much of herself into me to make me the best person I could be in this company. I try to run Sunshine Kids as close to what Kim would do if she were here."

The centers are only six miles apart, so if they need assistance, Main can simply hop in her car to help them.

Last month, Sunshine Kids celebrated 30 years in the business of caring, growing and learning, and also recently won the Observer-Reporter's Best of the Best daycare award. They have also won many other awards over the years.

"We were ecstatic when we heard we won," said Peroni. "It was so nice to have all our daycare directors together to go on stage and receive our award."

Jessica Dugan said Sunshine Kids has been such a loving and caring place for her family.

"Over the years, we've grown right alongside the daycare, and it's been a joy to watch our children form lasting friendships and develop together in such a supportive environment," said Dugan. "Seeing them grow into their own little selves, side-by-side with the same group of friends, has been an experience full of laughter, learning and connection and something we'll always be grateful for."

Over the past 30 years, the communication and technology world has evolved, allowing parents more access to their children while in daycare.

In the past, parents would receive a daily paper with all their child's information, including diaper changes, behavior, snacks and such.

But now, all three locations use the Brightwheel app to communicate with families, share daily logs, send photos and help keep families up to date on information and events in real-time. "Parents can contact us as well," said Main. "We put all the information in there in real time, and it has been a real game changer."

Peroni's son, Nickolas, has now become more involved with the business by working with Main to bring the daycares into the future, introducing ideas such as utilizing Brightwheel and creating QR codes to bring more up-to-date options for the parents.

"It is the most ever-changing field in the country," said Nikolas. "Every two years, you are going to have something different. There is always something new and exciting. It's never going to stay the same, which is what Tammy and I are so excited about. We've gotten to see it from the past, and we have my mom, who is absolutely an amazing resource who built this company over the past 30 years. We have some new fresh ideas and fresh faces that get to bring the new age stuff in there. Our clientele now are my age, young adults, 30-year-olds and people who use their phones."

Peroni said another thing that has evolved and changed over the years is the educational component of her centers.

She said when she started her centers, she hired teachers who were loving and caring to tend to the children in her centers. But, today, in addition to that, the teachers she hires are also educated with a Child Development Associate certification or an associate's or bachelor's degree.

"We use creative curriculum in all the classrooms," said Peroni. "Sunshine Kids has found funding to allow our employees to go to school to further their education to make sure the children are receiving the most academic performance in the classroom. We coordinate it with the teachers in the schools in the area."

Peroni and Main said they want to make sure the children are ready for kindergarten academically and emotionally by offering activities that will prepare them for school.

Some children may not have mastered self-help skills such as buttoning their pants, zippering their coat or taking off and putting on their shoes. So, they teach them life skills as well to prepare them for school.

"Thirty years ago, it was 'Here, take my kid and keep them happy,'" said Peroni. "But, now we are actually preparing them for the world."

Part of that preparation is through play.

"First and foremost, my girls are safe with Sunshine Kids and Ms. Tammy," said Bethany Addis, parent of a student. "I have never had to question that, and what a gift that is to a parent. Second, my girls are loved by Ms. Tammy and the staff. They are role models for my girls. My girls frequently play 'Ms. Tammy's' with their Barbies. They repeat the phrases the staff say, resolve fake arguments and educate Barbie's children. When I hear this play, I know they are being cared for with love."

The ages accepted at Sunshine Kids range from 6 weeks to 13 years.

In addition to being a daycare, they also offer before and after-school care, no-school days and summer care.

"The teachers have a variety of activities for the school-age children as well," said Main. "We can do more in-depth things with them. They can do cooking activities, scavenger hunts, models with clay, science experiments and more. We like to keep them busy."

They coordinate with the food program in Pennsylvania and prepare meals for the children, including breakfast, lunch, and snacks that are nutritionally based.

They also offer the Early Head Start program in the Eighty Four and Finleyville centers.

Many of their employees have been there for 20 years or more, and many of the children who used to attend now bring their own children there or even work there.

Jess Holowko said there are not enough words or the right words to express how important Sunshine Kids is to her family.

"My family and I moved to Pittsburgh from the Philadelphia area with no family or friends around," said Holowko. "We had no one. We walked into Sunshine Kids for a tour with our 9-month-old baby (at the time) and were immediately welcomed. Sunshine Kids didn't just become our daughter's daycare, they became our family."

Holowko said the staff at Sunshine Kids provides nothing but love, smiles, comfort, happiness and a safe space for children.

"The staff prioritizes teaching, having fun and being happy," she said. "Even on their worst days, they make sure to provide the absolute best for the kids. Every morning at drop-off, I felt at peace knowing my children were in the best care. The center and all the staff truly are a ray of sunshine. The lack of teacher turnover really speaks volumes and proves just how great the daycare and staff are. I am so proud of the center and staff for all their accomplishments."

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STAFF MEMBERS **PAM HALINKA**, EIGHTY FOUR DIRECTOR, **KIMBERLY PERONI**, PRESIDENT, **TAMMY MAIN**, OPERATIONS MANAGER AND **AMBER BEZY**, FINLEYVILLE SITE DIRECTOR OF SUNSHINE KIDS, AT THE OBSERVER-REPORTER BEST OF THE BEST AWARDS CEREMONY