

FAMILY

Coronavirus: Day care bolsters front-line response during crisis

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When essential workers are called to work during the coronavirus outbreak, they need a safe place for their children to go.

They've found it at Ellie's Academy in Somerville, one of the few child care centers permitted by the state to remain open.

Just one generation removed from the front line, director Tirusha Dave and her staff wanted to do their part, so others could do theirs.

"I have seen such an outpouring of support for other local businesses, and that has been so uplifting during this time, but I feel that early educators have become the 'forgotten heroes' during this pandemic," Dave said. "There has been a lot of chatter about child care centers remaining open. If we close, where will the front-line parents send their children? Who will care for them?"

"Our teachers made the decision to remain open, even before we spoke to them about it," added Dave, who's owned the child care facility with husband Prashanth Gorantala since January 2019. "And they did it for the families, because they knew they needed our services."

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When she told parents who aren't essential workers she could no longer be an option for them, it opened space for those looking for spots. Not a large, corporate enterprise, Ellie's Academy has capacity for about 60 children. Right now, just over a dozen children there have parents or guardians who are essential workers.

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"If you are a doctor or a nurse or a pharmacist or a grocery worker or someone stocking the shelves and you have a child, maybe you don't have the flexibility of having someone at home to watch your child," Dave said. "Even if you have grandparents who can, you don't want to make them susceptible to something. You don't want to risk that. And if your day care closes your doors to you, where are you going to go? It got me thinking that early educators are essential."

Dave also was worried about her staff and their needs; not just their safety, but financially.

"If we close our doors, how will our teachers remain whole? It's a complete 360-degree circle," she said. "Day care is not a glamorous six-figure salary, but this is their bread-and-butter. And they do so much. If we close, how do we pay the staff if there is no tuition and then how do they put food on their table."

Dave is aware that by staying open, Ellie's Academy and its staff are vulnerable.

"We are aware. We, too, are putting ourselves on the front line to support our community's essential workers," she said. "But, we are taking every precaution and then some. We are educating the children. Handwashing has always been an unwritten rule here. We are even doing a handwashing challenge with the children and their parents. Everything is a lot more strict and stringent. And the state has sent out more rules we have to implement and follow as well."

Dave said she and her husband took over an existing school. They made modifications and changed the name and were "welcomed by the community with open arms."

Now, they are giving back and opening their arms — within social distance guidelines — to the community.

"I really feel that early educators are an essential lifeline," she said. "We have the room, and we are fighting to stay open."

Amy Wierzbinsky of Bridgewater couldn't agree more. A single mother of three boys, Wierzbinsky sends her youngest — 2 1/2-year-old Anthony — to Ellie's Academy. Wierzbinsky works in transportation.

"I work for a trucking company/heavy duty diesel repair shop doing diesel emissions testing," she said. "We have to stay open during these difficult times to keep the truck drivers moving. Without our truck drivers, we would not be able to get all the essential supplies so badly needed everywhere."

Wierzbinsky said she is "extremely thankful for everything she (Dave) does to keep the center doors open."

"The teachers are amazing, and I can't thank them enough for putting themselves out there to help families like myself who still have to come to work every day," Wierzbinsky said. "The school is being so cautious making sure everything is sanitized so the children, parents and employees are safe throughout each day."

The mom of three added that if she couldn't be working she would "really be struggling."

"I know my baby is safe and very well taken care of while under Ellie's Academy's roof," Wierzbinsky said. "We call it our second home, an extended family."

Ellie's Academy is located at 250 Route 202. If you are an essential worker and are looking for child care from an approved facility, contact Dave at director@elliesacademy.com. Dave also began a GoFundMe for her educators at this time. The link is bit.ly/3bMUdaw.

For more information, go to elliesacademy.com, facebook.com/elliesacademy, instagram.com/elliesacademy and twitter.com/elliesacademy.

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