

THE MAGIC MIRROR

AN INTERVIEW WITH JESSICA PARNELL
BY ABIGAIL O'BRANOVICH

Last month, I had the pleasure of interviewing the CEO of Bridgeway Academy, Jessica Parnell. Jessica Parnell also owns the parent company, Edovate, whose subsidiaries are Curriculum Express, Elepanhgo, and of course, Bridgeway Academy.

Contrary to my initial beliefs, Parnell's parents started the corporation in 1989 out of a curriculum warehouse. This motivation was to provide an educational program for schools all over the East Coast. She explained that back in the late 80s, "it took too long for the [actual] publisher to ship it...So they set up a local warehouse." It only took six weeks for word to get around. They were getting a copious amount of requests for homeschoolers looking for a curriculum and, eventually, help.

So, they started Bridgeway Academy. Because Parnell was training in education, she helped her parents and gave them advice about it. "I helped them start it, but it is really their baby."

Parnell says that her time teaching in the Gifted Program at the local High School in Millersburg, PA led to how Bridgeway is setup today. "I guess what's significant is I grew up in schools that were very individualized so as a result, I was able to pace through my curriculum independently...So I kind of grew up with a homeschool-ish approach." Parnell later went on to become in charge of the Gifted Program. She has a realization that "all the students in my classroom are gifted...just in different ways."

The time spent with these kids ignited her passion to "pull out the excellence" in them and make sure they succeed in whatever they choose to be. Parnell wanted to release the incredible gifts and abilities that they don't see in themselves.

She wanted to be that magic mirror that could show them their deepest potential. This experience was a "large influence on developing Bridgeway into a personalized homeschool approach."

There was no Gifted Program when Parnell arrived, so she had the ability to develop it. Because she could not pull kids out in the middle of class, Parnell was challenged to find ways to incorporate the creative learning environments into their schedules and individual lives. She recalls one student who was excited about studying the field of law. "His project that he worked with me on was to [very much] work around criminal behavior in one city close to Harrisburg, getting to walk with law enforcement officers, getting to dig into some court proceedings." It was all designed around him.

As I mentioned previously, Parnell's parent company has three subsidiaries. (or as I like to call them, "children companies") Curriculum Express was created first, with Bridgeway following shortly after. In 2014, their third company, Elephango, was created.

Now, there is always the question: "Was this always the job you wanted to have?" And, my readers, the answer will amaze you. "I actually wanted to be a missionary in the prisons in Columbia, South America." "My parents, when I was in high school, brought in an exchange student who spoke Spanish to help nurture my language ability." It all started with a crush. A missionary family came to her church when she was seven, and they had a cute son. At seven, Parnell decided, "I am going to marry him and become a missionary." Her parents, like mine, nurtured those interests and helped her pursue those passions. Parnell went to school for criminology but later switched to psychology.



Jessica Parnell, the CEO of Bridgeway.

After presentations, professors would come to her and say she "stood out" and "should really think about teaching." She later realized that women are not welcomed in environments like that and heard about the prisons' shocking violence. So, Parnell decided to take her professor's advice and go to college at the Kutztown University of Pennsylvania.

Among all of the other notable accomplishments, Parnell has written and published several books. "The first book I wrote [actually] was on Pennsylvania state history, and it was in order to meet the needs in Pennsylvania for the requirement of state history for homeschoolers." In addition to her first publication, she also wrote **Unlocking Your Child's Genius**.

"We're really about trying to help people and parents specifically understand the different abilities around learning style. It's not just, 'hey, I'm an auditory student, so I need to hear...my lectures or hear my own voice, and have discussions.' It's even about how learning is presented."

Parnell also has a passion for neuroscience. This interest all stemmed from her mother. She was diagnosed with a brain tumor, which led to the motivation for this science. "She quickly....lost the ability to communicate. Well, she couldn't find words and couldn't speak well. And so I started to dig into how do we figure out a way for her to communicate, what other areas of the brain can we engage?"

Because of her hard work and dedication to Bridgeway, in 2017, Parnell was honored with the Lehigh Valley Women of Influence award and being a recipient of the Stevie Award for Women in Business. Bridgeway, as a company, applied for the Stevie Award. "We were looking for recognition as a company for what we were doing in the areas of teaching and learning."

As for the Woman in Influence award, that was a "nomination from an individual in our community who had seen a lot of work we did...that we were doing with Edovate, and was very excited about Elephango," which had just launched into its beta format.



When we were wrapping up, I asked Ms. Parnell if she had anything that she wanted our readers to know. "Own who you are. God has created you into each student, each individual with gifts and abilities and if we allow ourselves to be channeled into what everybody else is, you'll go through life always feeling like 'I'm in a box,' so own who you are. Don't be afraid to pursue what you're interested in. No matter how wild it seems, go after it! Because at the very least, you have gained new skills, you've learned new things and you have found that's not what you want, but if you don't go for it, you're the one saying no. I really encourage students...If you focus on academics only, you miss out on the incredible person that you are."

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