



SMART BUSINESS

Molding young minds and bodies

By KELLY A. GOFF Photography LIZ GARZA-WILLIAMS

Who knew you could make influencing the lives of children into a business? Four area women have done just that by combining their passions and experiences with their ambition and enthusiasm for today's youth.

They have been quietly, diligently going about the business of helping youngsters connect with their creativity, build their bodies and acquire skills that will serve them beyond their youth. Like the children they teach, these women have nurtured their businesses from infancy to adulthood with great success.

LORNA SPELLMAN
Boerne Gymnastics
Established 1991
BoerneGym.com

"Kids have to move to learn to move."

It's not every day you meet someone who ran away and joined the circus. That's what Lorna Spellman, founder of Boerne Gymnastics, did when she was 18. Well, sort of — she didn't run away (that was for dramatic effect), but she did join Ringling Bros. and Barnum & Bailey® Circus as an acrobat. "I competed in gymnastics throughout high school, and they [Ringling Bros.] offered me a position during my first year of college," recalls Spellman. "I knew it was the opportunity of a lifetime and took it."

Naturally, everyone wonders what her parents thought of her joining the circus.

Lorna Spellman, who once performed as a circus acrobat, has taught gymnastics in Boerne for 24 years. She and her staff of 12 coach about 400 students year-round.

"My dad was really into acrobatics and gymnastics. Growing up, we thought it was normal to stand on your father's shoulders and do flips," she laughs. "He was responsible for helping get the first gymnastics programs started in Indiana where I grew up, so he was extremely supportive about the circus."

Spellman trained with a professional stuntman in California before learning the choreography and dance moves from Ringling Bros. Her job was aerial work, which included elephant riding, web rope routines and 35-foot high dives. She lived on the circus train, traveling and performing throughout North America. "It was the greatest experience of my life at that time. I loved getting to know the other performers, 80 percent of whom were not from the United States. It was gratifying to work with people who were seriously dedicated to their craft," she says. It was also the perfect springboard for her future endeavors.

LOVE COMES TO TOWN

Spellman's circus days were short-lived, however. She had met the man who was to be her husband before she left for the circus. After a year of performing and traveling, she traded in her sequined leotard for a coach's uniform. She taught gymnastics in California and had her own gymnastics business in Louisiana for eight years before moving to Texas.

"My daughter was 3 years old, and I was pregnant with my son when we moved to Boerne. The plan was for me to retire from coaching and be a stay-at-home mom," remembers Spellman. "After my son was born, that lasted for

about six months. Then word got out that I used to teach gymnastics, and before I knew it, a friend talked me into coaching her kids, and it just kept going from there." That was 24 years ago.

After a few years of part-time coaching, Spellman knew she wanted to build a full-time gymnastics business. "We purchased land and started drawing up plans for the gym. I can remember typing out my business plan on a Commodore 64 computer," she recalls with a laugh.

Spellman readily acknowledges that you wouldn't normally find a gym as large as Boerne Gymnastics in a town the size of Boerne. "When I started this, I did it with the intention of being here a long time. We looked around and saw karate classes and dance studios that would start and then go belly-up in a few years. I didn't want to disappoint the kids who worked hard and got involved or the parents who invested time and money in uniforms, lessons and competitions," she says. "A lot of people believed in what we were trying to do. We were able to get a loan and build the size and type of facility that has contributed to our success."

Although establishing and growing the business often took away from family time, she knows in the long run her family sees the benefits and appreciates the future potential it offers.

With a staff of 12, Spellman and her coaches teach about 400 students year-round. Boerne Gymnastics offers parents' and tots' classes; traditional boys' and girls' gymnastics, where children learn Olympic events such as vault, bars, beam and floor; and a circus arts program. Spellman strives to stay on the

leading edge of the sport and started offering acrobatic gymnastics five years ago after luring two coaches from Bulgaria, Radostina Lachkova and Rumén Lachkov. The program has matured, and four dedicated students qualified for the USA Gymnastics National Team and recently competed in an international acrobatic gymnastic competition called the Freedom Cup.

"Investing in professionals, ensuring the environment and equipment are safe and offering innovative programs like our Gym Bus program have made all the difference," she says. "Parents will drive a long way for a program that is good for their kids." In addition to locals, Spellman has students from San Antonio, Bandera and Comfort. The steady growth and scores of former students who are returning to sign up their young children are a testament to the quality of her program.

DON'T STAGNATE

Part of Spellman's success is her willingness to experiment and innovate. Take the Gym Bus program her daughter manages: "I thought it was important for children to get exposure to gymnastics

early. So many kids go to day care these days, and many parents don't have the extra time or energy to pick them up and take them to classes. So we converted a bus and put a minigym inside. We drive to day cares and hold classes in the bus; the kids love it!"

She also has plans to expand the building to include a deep pit for high-level training and more workout space so they can offer a family fitness program. "Parents are always commenting how they wish there was a class for them so they didn't just sit there while their kids were having so much fun. Family fitness will be a class where kids can work on skills while parents get a cardio and strength-training workout," says Spellman.

Her advice for someone looking into business focused on children? "You must do something you enjoy and honestly believe in," she advises. "It's easy to teach something and promote it when you've seen the results firsthand. I believe gymnastics is the foundation for all other sports. Kids develop strength, balance, flexibility and coordination with gymnastics, but they also build self-confidence, learn social skills, and when they

get really involved, they gain life skills like self-discipline and time management that translate into real achievement."

LISA LOPEZ MARES

**Artworks: An Art Studio for Children
Established 1996**

ArtworksArtStudio.com

"Teaching creativity for life."

You hear Lisa Mares' roundabout story of how she came to establish Artworks, and somehow the Grateful Dead's *What a long, strange trip it's been* springs to mind.

After finishing her bachelor's degree in philosophy at St. Mary's University, Mares considered pursuing a law career, "but I decided arguing with adults didn't appeal to my true self," she says with a laugh. Instead she started a catering business in 1987 and three years later established a neighborhood home child care business before she had children.

PERSPECTIVE

"My friends thought I was crazy," she admits. "They asked why I would want to take care of a bunch of kids all day when I had a college degree, but I could see there was a need for quality child