Rhonda Paver intended to work as a teacher when she and her family moved to Austin, Texas, in 1979. Right off, she needed to find child care for her three children. Unsatisfied with the many large and small operations she looked into, Rhonda visited one final small house. The child care provider, looking exhausted, said she simply couldn’t go on in her business. Right then and there, drawing on her Alaskan family history of pioneering entrepreneurship, Rhonda decided she was going to build what she could not find. She and her family moved into that very building. The family lived on one side. On the other, Rhonda started an early care and education business with her three children, her nephew, and a neighbor’s child. Thirty-seven years, 20 schools, tens of thousands of families, and over 75,000 well-educated children later, Rhonda is not slowing down one bit.

What is Rhonda’s secret? Her goal in 1979 was to provide the best possible care for her own and her neighbors’ children. A continuing passion for providing high-quality care and education for children, with excellent customer service to their families, animates Rhonda. She notes, “The Stepping Stone School program focuses on the experience of the whole family. Everything we do — from the expert design of our buildings and curriculum to the selection of our nurturing staff members and implementation of our quality assurance program — is for the comfort and development of our children and the peace of mind of their parents.”

What exactly does ‘excellent customer service’ mean, when it comes to a child care program? For children, it manifests as a customized in-depth curriculum, delivered by carefully chosen and developed teachers, in buildings designed to teach and inspire. For parents, it consists of frequent communication through daily web-based information, newsletters, and invitations to participate in school activities with their child. Parents have an open invitation to visit their child’s school anytime, and accompany classes on field trips if they would like. This relationship with parents further inspires trust, and is a valuable component of Stepping Stone School’s commitment to customer service.

When Rhonda started her first school, she taught, cooked, cleaned, repaired what broke, and ran a business 14
Children up to age 13 in afterschool and school-break programs. Two programs, the Future Leaders and Innovators™ afterschool program, and the School-age Summer Camp are based in The Brainery™, a designated space for academic work. Although STEAM (Science, Technology, Engineering, Arts, and Mathematics) concepts are integrated into all age groups of the school’s curriculum, they become increasingly focused in these spaces.

Maintaining high-quality education in family-friendly settings requires careful selection of teachers, followed by ongoing support. All staff, teachers, and administrators are students in Stepping Stone School University™, a progressive program of continuous education developed in-house. This begins with a comprehensive orientation of workshops for new teachers. Teachers also receive ongoing training in age-specific curriculums and lesson planning throughout the rest of the year. Annually, conferences address issues of importance to the entire Stepping Stone School Community.

In Stepping Stone School programs, children are connected to their communities in many ways, ranging from field trips to charitable projects. Here, charitable activities aren’t simply fundraising events, they are educational and ethical experiences for all involved. A recent project that raised $10,000 for The Ronald McDonald House Charities of Central Texas is an excellent illustration.

During this year’s Young Entrepreneurs & Philanthropists™ summer camp, students made and sold food and crafts. Yet this activity wasn’t just stir, bake, make, and sell. Children formed teams, each with a specific function in the project. One team researched costs of materials for the food and crafts. Another team was involved in production. Yet another team created a marketing program for the sales.

The oldest children participate in the Advanced Kindergarten Readiness Program™ in which social/emotional, language, motor and cognitive skills are explored and strengthened as the child readies for public schooling. Important to this level is emphasis on developing the child’s self-competence as a learner, and on strengthening character development.

In addition to a full spectrum of early education, Stepping Stone School serves children up to age 13 in afterschool and school-break programs. Two programs, the Future Leaders and Innovators™ afterschool program, and the School-age Summer Camp are based in The Brainery™, a designated space for academic work. Although STEAM (Science, Technology, Engineering, Arts, and Mathematics) concepts are integrated into all age groups of the school’s curriculum, they become increasingly focused in these spaces.

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as you enter. Translucent artwork hang-  
ings depicting children as explorers,  
doctors, and scientists filter light  
through interior windows. Overhead,  
a large cloud-shaped cutout has been  
taken from the ceiling, exposing the  
ceiling joists. Children and families in  
this room are surrounded by inspiration,  
possibilities, stories, even information  
on how the school is built.

The School of Ideas features 15 class-  
rrooms, ranging from infant to school-  
age. They are arranged in age and  
developmental stage related clusters,  
each with its own play atrium. Each  
cluster is based on a developmental  
theme, such as “Brilliant Creators,” and  
“World Champions.” The latter, for three  
and four year olds who are developing  
their gross motor skills, features images  
of children playing sports. Boys and  
girls are equally represented as being  
capable athletes, scientists, and scholars  
on photos throughout the school.

The large main indoor play space in the  
School of Ideas speaks to discovery and  
storytelling. A quote from Christopher  
Columbus on the wall complements an  
abstract Santa Maria-inspired sailboat  
structure. Children are beckoned to play  
explorer in the boat, and with periscopes  
located along the wall. Columbus’ two  
other ships sail in the rubber flooring,  
which also features a compass rose.  
High overhead, exposed trusses against  
the ceiling suggest the construction of a  
boat’s hull. Floor, walls, the play struc-  
ture, even the ceiling conveys a unified  
message of storytelling and discovery,  
again, designed specifically to inspire  
children and their families.

Stepping Stone School’s success lies in  
its synergy between curriculum and  
growth. Innovative ideas are welcome  
in its child-centered academic programs.  
Sound business practices enable ongoing  
development of new campuses. Detailed  
attention, both to growing the child and  
to growing the school, is the rare balance  
Rhonda has achieved.

The values and heart that she brought  
to her first school, Rhonda blends with  
wisdom gained during her 37-year  
journey. Under her guidance, the large  
and growing Stepping Stone School  
provides very personalized experiences  
for the children, families, and commu-  
nity it serves.

Stepping Stone School is involved  
with giving back to the community in  
other ways, as well. Rhonda supports  
past students through an innova-  
tive college scholarship program.  
College-age graduates of the preschool  
program can apply for financial assis-  
tance. As with the philanthropreneur  
program, this scholarship involves  
effort and learning on the applicant’s  
part. After completing paper work, the  
applicant has a face-to-face interview  
with Rhonda. Even after graduating  
from the preschool, students remain  
part of the Stepping Stone family.

As the school has grown in sophis-  
tication over the years, so, too, have  
its spaces. The older schools were  
purchased as existing buildings and  
remodeled. An in-house architect  
has designed the newer schools. He  
collaborates closely with Rhonda and  
other education specialists during the  
design process.

The Stepping Stone School of Ideas  
is an enchanting example. Its design  
incorporates architectural features,  
signage, artwork, and play features  
that support best practices in early  
childhood education. Even the  
entryway is inspirational. A model of  
Amelia Earhart’s plane soars overhead  
above the main play space, giving  
aerial perspective to the child’s  
exploration.

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