

Harrisburg and Eldorado Early Learning Centers

Like many new mothers, Patricia Ingram wanted to find a way to stay home with her daughter when she was a newborn. Realizing that she always liked being around children, the prospect of watching another parent's child, while she cared for her own, seemed like a good idea in 1986. Mrs. Ingram started small and cared for one other child in her home. Over the years, she began to watch additional children in her home and saw her income grow.



After moving to Southern Illinois, she got in touch with the area Child Care Resource and Referral Agency and decided that it was time to license her home based child care. In 1993, she opened Miss Patty Cakes Day Care in her home in Harrisburg. At the time, her husband who had been working as a truck driver, was laid off and beginning a new career in the ministry. He was enlisted into the child care business as well.

As a licensed day care Miss Patty Cakes received parent referrals from the area Child Care Resource and Referral Agency and maintained an excellent working relationship with the area representative from the Illinois Department of Children and Family Services (DCFS), the state's day care licensing agency. As a licensed home day care, Mrs. Ingram could care for up to eight children, with a part time assistant and both Mr. and Mrs. Ingram providing most of the care. The center "does not discriminate, and we have had a number of special needs children throughout the years" said Mrs. Ingram. Miss Patty Cakes Day Care, a minority and woman owned business, began providing before and after school care, because Mrs. Ingram was asked by parents to provide this needed service. Miss Patty Cakes caters to children from six weeks to twelve years old and the Ingram's provide extended hour care for parents, up to a maximum of 18 hours a day.

In 2002, Mrs. Ingram learned that a Harrisburg building where a child care center was once located, was vacant. The owner, the Saline County Housing Corporation was interested in finding a new user and approached Mrs. Ingram about expanding her day care business into the building.

In considering expanding her business and opening her first child care center, Mrs. Ingram approached the Southeastern Illinois College Small Business Development Center (SBDC) in Harrisburg for assistance. The Southeastern Illinois College Small Business Development Center is one of the forty SBDC's throughout the state that are supported by the Illinois Department of Commerce and Economic Opportunity and the U.S. Small Business Administration.

One of the conditions of getting a DCFS license is to have a business plan, and the Southeastern Illinois College Small Business Development Center helped the Ingram's develop a business plan for the Harrisburg Center.

The housing organization made all the necessary repairs to the building to meet the very stringent codes required for all child care centers. The repair of the building took longer than expected, but the space is bright, cheerful and has a "beautiful fenced-in back yard for the children" said Mrs. Ingram. The Harrisburg Center can handle 20 children, ages two to five and has a staff of three full time teachers. Mrs. Ingram opened the center in 2002 with an \$8,000 low interest loan from the Southeastern Illinois Regional Planning and Development Commission. The loan paid for new equipment for the Harrisburg center. The Ingram's decided to retain their day care center in the home, which is only minutes away from the Harrisburg Early Learning Center.

The Ingram's day care centers provide a structured curriculum for children. "We provide a safe learning environment for the child. No parent wants to worry about their child in day care, so I have to meet both the needs of the parent and the needs of the child" said Mrs. Ingram.

In the past two months, Mrs. Ingram has again expanded her child care "empire" with a new site located in Eldorado, about seven miles away from her home. Mrs. Ingram approached Ginger Reynolds of the Southeastern Illinois College SBDC when the space in Eldorado became available, and they helped update her business plan. "Ginger was so nice" said Mrs. Ingram, "she helped us create a really professional looking plan."

The Eldorado center, which is licensed to care for up to 20 children, is now gearing up, and already has seven children enrolled. The child care operation in Eldorado is open from 6AM to 8 PM and services children from two to ten years old.

Mrs. Ingram has been fortunate in that she has never had to advertise to fill her child care spaces. In fact in the early years before the Harrisburg Center opened, she had an unlisted phone number, but never had trouble filling her centers.

Because Mrs. Ingram has been so successful, and has earned an excellent reputation among parents for the quality of care she provides, she is often approached about expanding her operation to other communities. She did not plan her expansions, rather, these opportunities came to her because she was providing a quality and much needed service in the community.

Mrs. Ingram is the first member of her family to own a business, and she says that she "did it all backwards" and learned by doing and making her own mistakes. But her entrepreneurial spirit is bright and she is seeing the fruits of her labor.

The Southeastern Illinois College Small Business Development Center is a member of the Illinois Small Business Development Center Network, working in partnership with the Illinois Department of Commerce and Economic Opportunity's Small Business Development Center and the U.S. Small Business Administration.