

Jessica Sager

This Smart Cookie Awards nominee talks to *Cookie* about how she got the idea to start All Our Kin—a nonprofit that trains child-care providers and expands access to child care for low-income families—and how it helps her balance her own role as a working mother.

I went to law school at Yale, which is a legal community that values policy work. I decided to go there because I was interested in advocacy and children—I really wanted to make systemic change. Right away, I got involved in researching the Personal Responsibility Act, the welfare reform bill that had just been signed into law. The legislation put restrictions on recipients of public assistance, putting a lot of women in a very tough bind about making choices about their children. They needed to be in work-experience programs to get benefits, and I thought, *These could be programs that train women to work with kids, and then they could bring their own kids.* My friends at law school got excited and started working with me to make it real.

I had a friend who was studying at the Harvard School of Education, Janna Wagner, who was very passionate about early childhood education. We created All Our Kin together and launched it in 1999. We were using donated space in a housing project, donated toys; we raised a tiny bit of money, and I had a fellowship from the law school. Now we're in downtown New Haven, but at that point we were in an isolated housing project. We flied like crazy, knocked on everyone's doors, and the response was overwhelming. We were truly amazed at the demand for this service. Women told me, "All my life, this has been my dream, to work with children—what stopped me was my commitment to my own kids. Now I get to train for a job, learn new skills and techniques, and be with my children."

Programs

We started graduating students from the program, and many opened home-based child-care services, which exponentially expanded available care. The people who went to child-care centers to work had built-in support, but people running home-based care really needed our help. We looked at models in other states and brought them lesson plans, resources, supplies.



Someone said, "What about all of the people who are providing care underground, without a license?" A lot of people provide care without meeting any standards at all. They're supposed to be licensed, but they didn't do it initially—they didn't know how—and now they're too scared. So we worked to put together tool-kit boxes to help them with the licensing process. We tried to provide all the things people need to become licensed—mentorship, support, walking though the house and showing them how to childproof, calling the state, filling out forms. Now they're meeting health and safety standards, and they can call themselves professionals. Our organization is small enough that we can move pretty fast and meet urgent needs quickly.

Looking Forward

At some point, we want to try to change policymakers' minds, and our goal is to get in a position where we can try to do that. Lack of quality child care is an incredibly daunting problem. How do we do a better job of advocating and convincing people of this? Right now our efforts are focused at the state level. Our local government is thinking a lot about

the issues for 3- and 4-year-olds, but what about the infants and toddlers? All kids should have quality early care and education experiences, whether home-based systems or center-based systems.

Finding quality child care is a dilemma that crosses all economic levels. We need to create a much more diverse provider community. We've started working with the Yale Child Study Center [which is part of the Yale School of Medicine] to identify the best home-based providers who have graduated from All Our Kin; the hope is that Yale employees can then access care through those home-based provider communities. It's an exciting and innovative project, [that expands child-care options for the university's employees.]

My daughter, Sophia, is 2, and I'm really lucky, because my job is demanding but I work with people who adore babies. I have the kind of job where if I have an evening meeting, she can come with me. She's very much part of my working life. While it is always a struggle to balance, every moment with her reinforces why the work I do is so important. I know I couldn't do it if I didn't have wonderful child care—and what's great is that one of her teachers is actually a graduate of All Our Kin.