

The IDEAL School . . . and the Amazing Family Behind It

Story by Krista Martinelli, Photos by Lois Spatz

What school would you pick if you had twin two-year-old boys, one labeled as quadrapelegic—yet both testing at normal intelligence? For Wendy and Kris Soderman, they took the most challenging route, building their own school from scratch, the IDEAL School of Royal Palm Beach.

The Sodermans faced the discrimination of some of their fellow townspeople in London, Ontario who felt that Wendy made a mistake when she made a life-saving decision to have Kyle (at 4 lbs.) and Korey (at one lb.) by C-section. Faced with judgmental editorials in the local paper and a general lack of support, the Sodermans moved to Florida to start a new life. Wendy had been a school teacher in Canada and Kris had a PhD in Engineering. According to Wendy, the family just needed a fresh start in a new place.

She was heart-broken to find that no school in South Florida seemed ready to teach both of her boys. Although by law they could not discriminate against a “special needs” child, each school gave the same story to her after meeting her boys—they had just given out the last spot in the classroom.

Her husband Kris challenged Wendy to start her own school. She admits that she felt “challenged enough” just trying to be a good mother and care for her two-year-old twins. However, to her own surprise, Wendy spotted a patch of grass by the side of the original Wellington Mall one day and envisioned a playground. Then she envisioned the school that would go with it. She was already growing accustomed to people shying away from Korey in the wheelchair and was worried that people would not want to sign up for the school when they first saw her with her two boys.

“So I decided to make the school as visually appealing as possible. In my head, I thought if we make this like Disney and trap them with ‘pretty,’ then they’ll come in. And once they get to know us, they’ll love us,” recalls Soderman.

She envisioned a whimsical ship that would protrude out of the classroom, a winding yellow brick road and costumes that she would wear each day while teaching, including a Cinderella costume. Still it all seemed more like a stretch of the imagination than a solid business plan.

She approached the landlord of the original Wellington Mall, Jess Santamaria. And fortunately for the Sodermans, Santamaria



Clockwise: Wendy, Kris, Korey & Kyle Soderman of the IDEAL school

had a big heart and a willingness to give their school a chance. (See story about Jess Santamaria in this issue, page 27).

“Jess asked me, ‘Have you ever owned a business before?’ and I said, ‘no.’ Somehow he believed in us and he decided to give us a fair chance,” says Wendy, even though she thinks that most landlords would have never considered her proposal.

Before she knew it, she was in business! She found a couple of men to

build the ship she envisioned and created a lively learning space for the children who enrolled. Trying to appeal to both of her boys’ learning styles, she used every method of teaching she could to get lesson plans across, using all of the five senses and even putting on theatrical productions with the children. She didn’t know what theory of education she was applying, as she was just in survival teaching mode. But later,

Wendy found out that she was using Harvard professor Howard Gardner’s Multiple Intelligence Theory, appealing to eight different types of intelligence.

Her boys Korey and Kyle were not the only ones benefiting from Soderman’s tremendous efforts to teach. After only a couple of years of running the school, Soderman received a strange phone call from the head of the school board in Tallahassee. Because so many of the children in her class tested as “gifted” after taking IQ tests, she was accused of somehow cheating on the test and teaching the IQ test ahead of time to her young students.



A winding yellow brick road, Soderman says, is not the most cost-effective way to lay down hallway flooring. However, the children love it!

In a way, Soderman was flattered by the accusation. She had never seen the IQ test and wondered why her school would be scolded for doing a good job. She was just teaching in the most dramatic way possible.

“Instead of talking about a zoo, I would turn the room into a zoo,” says Soderman.

The school board in Tallahassee dropped their accusations against Soderman and she continued to teach in the best ways she knew how. The school was wildly successful and grew. And grew.

After six years, their landlord Santamaria drove the Sodermans back to a warehouse space off of Royal Palm Beach Boulevard. Soderman thought to herself, “No one will come here.” The space was hidden behind other buildings and not easy to find.

However, they decided to take another chance and expand the school to take children from pre-school age all the way to 5th grade. At this time, Kris decided to join Wendy’s efforts as the general operating manager of the school. The husband and wife team have shared an office ever since.

So thanks to the encouragement of Santamaria, the IDEAL School moved to the new location—with plenty of warehouse space to keep expanding.

Today the twin boys are eighteen years old and the school will be ready to teach children ranging from three years to 8th grade when they begin again this month. From preschool to 5th grade, children attend the IDEAL school and from 6th to 8th grade they attend the neighboring DREAM school. The interior of the school, now spanning to two large buildings, is shockingly beautiful and three-dimensional throughout. The walls are not just walls, but canvases for intricate murals by various artists from around the globe.

What’s unique about IDEAL is that they are not examining how smart the child is, but how the child is smart. The IDEAL (Innovative Developmental Enriched Active Learning) school bases their curriculum on the philosophy of multiple intelligences, founded by Howard Gardner, a Professor at the Harvard Graduate School of Education. In every lesson plan, the teachers must incorporate all of the eight types of intelligence (listed at right). On a typical day, the teachers coordinate a “big show” at the end of the school day, putting on a spontaneous theatrical production of the major lesson of the day.

“Our teachers do not interview to work here. They audition,” says Wendy Soderman.

Different from many other school systems, the children are not given any external rewards for the good work they accomplish. They are given a choice of experiences that they enjoy.

For example, one of the experiences a child can be

Continues on Page 24



Jeff & Marlen Ryan
Keller Williams Realty
Residential*Commercial*Property Management

Jeff - 561.723.1647
Marlen - 561.202.5773
jmryanrealty@yahoo.com

“Go confidently in the direction of your dreams! Live the life you've imagined. As you simplify your life, the laws of the universe will be simpler.”
Henry David Thoreau



The 8 Major Intelligences include:

- | | |
|--------------------|---------------------|
| 1. Word Smart | 5. Nature Smart |
| 2. Art/Space Smart | 6. Self Smart |
| 3. Body Smart | 7. Music Smart |
| 4. People Smart | 8. Logic/Math Smart |



An airplane mural on the wall illustrates 8 famous people and 8 types of intelligence

IDEAL School (Continued from Page 17)

rewarded with is walking the Soderman's dog, Ooh-Aah, who's always in the reception area of the school.

IDEAL is not focused on any one type of student. They have many students who are considered "gifted." They also enroll special needs students, although the students are treated as every other student.

The Sodermans simply wanted to provide a school that would work for everyone, including their twins Korey and Kyle. Now that Korey and Kyle are eighteen years old, their relationship is stronger than ever, even though Kyle is going off to college and Korey is staying home.

Wendy explains, "I remember when the boys were little and they were playing in their room. Korey was laying on the floor—he couldn't sit—and his brother leaned into his face and out of the blue stated, 'I'm glad you listened to me in mommy's tummy and didn't die.' Kyle feels responsible for Korey, acts as his protector. Korey sees his brother Kyle as his arms, legs and voice. Korey lives vicariously through Kyle's life. Korey watches Kyles life like watching a Broadway play—feeling many emotions. Kyle knows this and ensures that he gives his brother (audience) a show he won't forget. Both boys have a tattoo for each other. Kyle drew a wheelchair with Korey's name on it, and it's tattooed on

Korey's arm. Kyle got a tattoo on his bicep of a cardinal (Korey's angel) with a banner stating 'He ain't Heavy He's My Brother.' Quite simply they are brothers, identically different twins that love each other unconditionally!"

This past Mother's Day Wendy decided to get a tattoo as well—she picked a lotus flower. It was the significance of the way the lotus flower grows that was very meaningful to her. Out of murkiness and hardship comes a beautiful flower, a metaphor for the life that their family has created. At the end of September, the Sodermans will appear on the TV show *Miami Ink*, showing off their tattoos.

The Soderman family is no stranger to the media. They've had more than their "fifteen minutes of fame," perhaps because they attract and inspire so many others. One of the producers of "The Secret" (which was popularized by Oprah), Bob Proctor, came to visit with the Sodermans in June. His company, Lifesuccess, is working on a project related to inspiring efforts in the field of education and they inter-

viewed the Sodermans at length.

In 2004, song writer Kenny Loggins made a special visit to the IDEAL school, after Wendy Soderman wrote a letter to him, explaining how one of his songs had changed her life.

"Kenny wrote the song 'This is it' that I listened to in the hospital for two and a half months while on bedrest. The words to this song inspired me to save my son regardless of his physical disability. The song told me to 'stand up and fight for my miracle,' my son," says Soderman.

When Loggins came to IDEAL School it validated Soderman's belief in miracles and her unconditional faith.

"The universe provided a strong message, 'Korey is meant to be here,'" says Soderman. A short A & E video (with an introduction by Robert Downey, Jr.) about Soderman's inspiration coming from this song can be found on the IDEAL website: www.idealelementary.com.

Today throughout the school, there are symbols—motifs of the special things that have inspired the Soderman family—all over the walls, Kenny Loggins included. Cardinals can be found in every room of the school, the "angels with red wings," as explained in a related story written by Wendy Soderman (see page 9). The IDEAL students wear the cardinal symbol proudly on their school shirts.

The school creates a magical environment for young learners. Every morning begins with twenty minutes of Handel music playing. Studies show that this music acts as a "detox" for the system, clearing the mind.

These days the ratio of preschool students to teachers is 6 to 1 and the ratio of older students to teachers is 22 to 1 teacher, plus one assistant. Children are grouped by ability, not necessarily by age.

The level of parent involvement points to the effectiveness of the school. Parents get involved in helping out with every possible aspect of the school's necessities, including lunch times, lesson plans, field trips and dances.

"The joke around here is that you never know who's a parent and who's a teacher," says Soderman.

There are so many miracles surrounding the school, too many amazing stories to even condense into one story. For example, IDEAL has a 4-year-old student enrolled named Graham Stark. He's the grandson of Dr. Graham Chance, who was the head of the Neonatal Unit in London, Ontario where the Sodermans delivered their twin boys...eighteen years ago. Dr. Chance was overseeing things on that day when they called a "Code Blue" in



Kenny Loggins visiting with the Sodermans in 2004. Photo provided by Wendy Soderman.

Continues on Page 26

IDEAL School *(Continued from Page 24)*

the hospital and the Sodermans were given three minutes to decide whether to have both babies at a risky stage or carry one baby to full term.

Wendy Soderman often alludes to a higher power at work in her life and in their school. The fact that Dr. Chance's grandson ended up in her school in Royal Palm Beach, Florida is just another one of those small miracles.

"Truly seeing how passionate these children are and getting to watch them grow up" makes all of the hard work worthwhile for Wendy. It's just a small bonus that the IDEAL students test much higher on standard tests than expected for their grade levels. In some subjects, tests show that these students are as many as five years ahead (especially in reading and language). More importantly, Soderman is excited to see that some of these children today will make a big difference in our world tomorrow. They are creators and problem-solvers, fostered in the challenging environment of this very special school.

"It's amazing to think that someone is going to go out in the world and make a big difference, all because of this school, and before that, all because of this boy in a wheelchair who inspired us all," says Soderman.

To find out more about the IDEAL school and the DREAM middle school, you can visit www.idealelementary.com or call (561) 791-2881.



Top: One of the many murals that make the Ideal School so extraordinary. Every room is a work of art!

Bottom: Kyle, Wendy, Corey and Dr. Kris Soderman



"Share Some" Popcorn Reinvented

**Gourmet Creations • Corporate Gifts
Special Events • Private Parties in Gathering Room
Birthday Party Room on Site**

1-800-POPCORN

561-932-0135

Dale and Thomas Popcorn - The Mall at Wellington Green
2nd Floor - Next to JC Penney - www.daleandthomas.com

