

The Post-Crescent (Appleton, Wisconsin)

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Acquiring a foreign accent

By Maureen Wallenfang
Post-Crescent staff writer

Christina Moubarak

Title: Director and owner of Belanno

- Type of business: Foreign language and culture classes for children up to age 10
- When classes start: Free four-week trial classes begin in May. One-week summer camps start in July. Full schedule of regular 45-minute to one-hour classes begin in the fall. Regular schedule classes will be \$15 to \$20 per class.
- Moubarak's background: Age 37, Appleton native and current resident. Has a degree in interdisciplinary studies from the University of Wisconsin-Green Bay. Worked at the Fox Cities Chamber of Commerce and Industry 1996 to 2007. Was manager of the chamber's Pulse networking group from Feb. 2002 to Dec. 2007. Before that, worked with the Christa McAuliffe Academy and the youth apprenticeship programs at the chamber.
- Coming Web site: www.belanno.com
- Phone: 920-202-3431
- Employees: Six teachers will be under contract for the summer; 10 to 15 in the fall.

Q: A lot of people know you as manager of Pulse, the young professionals network. You've left that to start this business. Why?

A: I've always had an entrepreneurial spirit. And since I've had children, I'm always looking for unique opportunities for them to try. I want my kids to be exposed to languages, cultures and differences. I thought, "Why can't I do that?" I have the knowledge of how to set up a business. I have the contacts. I have the passion for children. I know what I want them to learn and what other people want.

Q: How early can children start?

A: We're focusing on birth to 10 years. We speak to babies in a language. I don't suggest bringing a newborn in. Anywhere from 6 to 8 weeks is typical, from language schools that I've studied.

Q: Why start so early?

A: That's a great time to expose your child to language development because the baby's brain accepts the different tonal sounds more rapidly. However, any time is a great time to start a language. The younger the better. It's easier for you to learn as you grow up if you do it earlier. In the summertime, we won't accept babies. We'll do older; pre-K to 10. We'll group them according to age and ability.

Q: How are you finding your teachers?

A: I started to think "Who is my customer?" and "What would I pay for as a mom?" I have two kids in the Appleton Area School District. I'm a co-chair for the foreign language after-school program. I started to get names of teachers who might be interested from the district. I volunteered to be a part of the World Language Parent Association.

Q: Besides Menasha, who teaches foreign languages at this age level now?

A: Currently, there is no foreign language in most of the Appleton schools. Some schools have it, but it is not the mainstream curriculum. Of course there is (foreign language) in the charter schools and private schools. Montessori has it. Classical has it. The nonprofit Valley Academy for the Arts in downtown Neenah has after-school foreign language. A few people teach languages out of their houses. There's no competition for what I'm trying to accomplish.

Q: When are most kids offered a language?

A: Possibly middle school. But I'm not taking the place of what schools are going to do. They could have foreign language today and I'm going to be supportive of it and volunteer to help. Ultimately, as a society, we need foreign language to get along with each other. The kids will be more patient with kids who are bilingual. You're helping kids experience a culture of a country they can't visit until they're much older. We're not going to make them do sentence structures or give them a vocabulary list. It's through immersion, through the five senses. It's not the way you and I learned foreign languages in high school.

Q: How'd you get the business side going?

A: I worked with SCORE. They guided me through the process. I also have taken E-Seed at Fox Valley Tech two years ago. I did spreadsheets and thought of every single thing I might spend money on.

Q: When will you make a profit?

A: If all goes well, and my projections are moderate, I'd say at this time next year I hope to make a small salary. But the small salary's going to go back into the business. It will be two or three years before I keep it.

Q: What languages will you offer?

A: The free classes in May will be in Spanish. This summer, so far, I have teachers in Spanish and Chinese confirmed and pending teachers in French and Arabic. I did some research in what we should offer and the State Department would really like people to know Arabic, Chinese, Korean and Hindu.

Q: Where do you meet?

A: Hopefully at this time next year I'll have my own place. Right now, I'm going to be using space at the Family Resource Center on Appleton Road in Menasha. We'll also have some summer camps at Appleton North.

Q: You've got rent, teachers' pay and supplies. How are you funding this?

A: It is out of my own pocket.

Q: Is this a franchise?

A: It's not. This is my own idea.

Innovator insights

Timing: "I quickly realized after school is a difficult time for kids to focus on learning another thing. They need the space to be creative, to go running. There's a reason why after-school activities are sports. The kids are rambunctious and antsy. You don't want to be an after-school babysitting program. So these are evening classes. I'm thinking 6 p.m."

Research: "I studied probably about 50 curriculums from around the country. I bought a few. I talked to foreign language teachers. I'm not the expert. I found the experts to help me. As we go along we'll tweak things to make them better and bigger."

Evolving: "I'm an entrepreneur. I'm a mom. I've changed. I'm not in the 20-something crowd anymore."

Know a young entrepreneur?

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