

Friday, October 3, 2008

# Little Sprouts' sister act proves to be winning combo

Siblings take the time to focus on being successful colleagues

Boston Business Journal - by [Mary Moore](#) Special to the Journal



M. MARY MOORE | BUSINESS JOURNAL  
Susan Leger-Ferraro, CEO of Little Sprouts Child Enrichment Centers Inc., works well with her younger sister, CFO Melissa Leger.

If you believe all sisters fight like cats, then you haven't heard about Susan Leger-Ferraro and Melissa Leger.

These two sisters have worked side by side for years, no fights, to build the Lawrence-based **Little Sprouts Child Enrichment Centers Inc.**, which has done plenty of sprouting of its own: from a small, home-based education program in the early 1980s to a network of seven locations and nearly 240 employees today.

There are five sisters in the Leger family (another sister also works at Little Sprouts), but Susan and Melissa always were close. Leger-Ferraro says she took Melissa with her "everywhere" when they were kids; Melissa says she was "in awe" of her elder sibling.

The elder of the two, Leger-Ferraro started the business when she graduated high school in the early 1980s. A decade later, after finishing her undergraduate degree in international finance, Melissa joined the operation full time as the CFO.

Little Sprouts grew to \$5.5 million in revenue in 2006 from \$4.4 million in revenue the year before. In 2007, the last year the company made its financials public, Little Sprouts was projecting revenues of upwards of \$7 million. Future plans include the opening of 20 new schools by 2013 and expanding nationally.

As the sisters transitioned family life into work life, their relationship had its challenges, but they figured out ways to work through the difficulties. For one, they put communication and goal-setting techniques such as Stephen Covey's "The Seven Habits of Highly Successful People" into practice.

“It’s a beautiful way to manage people,” said Krysta O’Neill, vice president of operations for Little Sprouts. “They’re very welcoming. That’s always a concern when you work with family. But they balance each other really well.”

Together, the sisters are balanced; individually, they are opposite ends of the spectrum. Leger-Ferraro is the visionary, the networker, the outgoing one.

“I was always talking about leadership and development. ‘Hogwash,’ she’d say. She’s very black and white,” said Susan, referring to Melissa — who agreed. “We’re like night and day,” said Melissa. “She’s full of life and always on the go, her mind never stops. I’m quiet, reserved, in the background.”

They found common ground professionally when they focused on being colleagues. In addition to Little Sprouts, they also own a real estate development company called Peace, Love and Happiness; Susan is the CEO and Melissa is the CFO.

“We’ve had to be intentional about being respectful about each other’s professional development,” Leger said. “We had to take each other seriously. It didn’t happen overnight. It takes great effort and intention.”

Getting where Leger-Ferraro envisions going with Little Sprouts requires the sisters to stay in sync. Leger-Ferraro has made it clear she was ready to take Little Sprouts to the national stage.

To that end, Little Sprouts was acquired last February by **American Education Group**, based in Grand Rapids, Mich. The acquisition has bolstered Leger-Ferrara’s desire to expand Little Sprouts’ geography, but the change also has created some questions for the sisters about their future.

“There may come a time when we may not work together and we recognized this when we first considered the merger,” Leger-Ferrara said. “We acknowledged that this might be wrapping it up.”

Perhaps they’ve just reached another bend in the road they’ve traveled.

“We’re not just sisters, we’re business partners,” Melissa said. “We’re doing something we’re passionate about and we can see what we’ve created over all these years.”