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../Morning Post

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## Education

### School's Cool president leverages advice, guidance from experienced business mentors to seal North American distribution agreement, secure private investment

Markham – For more than a decade, Gena Robertson has helped Canadians make a successful transition from home to school as creator of School's Cool, a school readiness program for children aged three to five. Now, after taking her own 'readiness' steps with the help of the Innovation Synergy Centre in Markham (ISCM) Investment Network and making the shift from not-for-profit social worker to business-savvy company president, she's poised to extend that reach to children all over the world.

In October, Robertson signed a royalty-based distribution agreement with FlagHouse Inc. of Hasbrouck Heights, New Jersey, a major supplier to the North American educational market. FlagHouse will produce and market the School's Cool program contents while Robertson and her company retain the rights to provide training and certification to instructors. She has also secured interest from a private investor with connections internationally, including Australia and Hong Kong. For Robertson, the recent successes mark the end of one successful journey and the start of another.

"I've had this little image in my head for years now of pushing this gigantic snowball up a mountain, and it just keeps getting bigger and bigger," she says. "I think I've finally pushed it over the edge and it's actually starting to roll."

The School's Cool journey started in 1998 in Haliburton, Ontario, where Robertson leads a non-profit organization specialized in developing community-based programs geared at helping vulnerable families. Intending to level the playing field for at-risk children, Robertson developed an approach to learning based on 122 activities that link play experiences to learning outcomes.

The resulting School's Cool program is a 24-session curriculum designed to increase the school readiness of children aged three to five who may not be prepared for the learning opportunities kindergarten provides. In addition to teaching foundational skills in language, math/cognitive, psychological, social and self-help areas, it also builds familiarity with routines and expectations, and gives children an excitement for learning.

The program is being used by tens of thousands of children in Ontario, British Columbia, Alberta, Manitoba and the Maritimes, with more than 1,500 instructors trained to date.

"School readiness isn't just about knowing colours, ABCs and shapes," explains Robertson. "It's about having a strong foundation so children can ask questions, get along with their peers, be confident to try new things and apply simple problem-solving skills."

After enjoying a few early successes at school boards, kindergarten classes and early learning centres across Ontario, Robertson knew she was onto something with School's Cool but didn't know how to make the leap from covering costs to generating a recurring revenue stream that would enable her to reach as many children as possible.

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In 2006, she turned to ISCM for assistance and was matched with mentor Reza Alavie, an advertising professor at Seneca College in Toronto. "When I first met Gena, the green light went on in my head and I remember thinking, 'Wow! This thing has potential,'" recalls Alavie. "But, for some reason, in spite of Gena's efforts, it wasn't getting anywhere."

Alavie identified that in order to attract investors, Robertson needed to change her business model, packaging and pricing, and introduced her to Investment Network mentor Jim Stewart for guidance. The Investment Network, a division of the ISCM, helps entrepreneurs – at no charge – to build successful companies that are attractive to the financing community. Since its inception, it has worked with several businesses that have gone on to secure multimillion-dollar sales contracts, and has helped 28 companies obtain roughly \$7.4 million in first rounds of equity and debt financing.

With Stewart's support, Robertson went through the onerous task of developing a business plan and was in the process of looking for investors, sourcing components, and calculating her costs when a chance meeting – or, as she likes to say, "serendipity" – took over. After presenting her newly-developed sales pitch to investors at an Investment Network event, Robertson was introduced to Barbara McCormick, head of Canadian operations for FlagHouse. They began to share information and it was soon evident that School's Cool might be a good fit for FlagHouse which was in the process of developing an early childhood division.

Eventually, Robertson was asked to consider a distribution deal as an alternative to investment.

"We started to go down that road with FlagHouse, and the further we went, the more logical sense it made," says Stewart, noting that he was impressed by how quickly Robertson developed a good head for business. "I was steering Gena but she was making the decisions," he says.

"The Investment Network's support was indispensable," notes Gena, adding that negotiating business wasn't always easy for a social worker accustomed to finding the win-win in situations. "My mentors boosted my confidence, provided expertise and put me in touch with the right people when necessary. The Investment Network's integrated and collaborative approach to helping entrepreneurs build their businesses and bring in the right people was critical for us. We may never have done it on our own."

Since signing with FlagHouse, School's Cool has trained 50 FlagHouse staff members across the U.S. and Canada, participated in a strategic marketing plan, and landed a spot in the most recent FlagHouse catalogue. As she eagerly awaits results, Robertson is confident her program will catch on, particularly in provinces like Ontario which recently announced full-day kindergarten for more than 35,000 students at 600 schools. She also has a potential customer from the Department of Education in Australia.

Designed to fit into several different learning environments, including daycare, formal education and tutoring, the School's Cool program is effective across cultural groups. An evaluation conducted by University of Guelph Professor Dr. Susan Chaung concludes that School's Cool effectively promotes "children's intrinsic motivation for learning and builds their skills and competencies to be successful as they transition to formal schooling."

"In my head, I'm likening my business to a cruise ship slowly getting away from the dock," says Robertson. "It's been a lot of hard work and dedication to prepare for the next leg of the journey, and I couldn't have done it without the support of ISCM Investment Network mentors."

Email Editor

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