

# GREENWICH BUSINESS



Why a Web-Based Business Still Needs Merchants... A17

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## Parent's Experience Spawns Educational Program

BY CHRISTINE CHAGARIS

A young boy enthusiastically bounds out of his chair at the Gemm Learning center in Old Greenwich and announces to center director Tina Liberatore that he got the maximum number of points on his session's exercises. Liberatore is noticeably pleased.

The saying that a picture is worth a thousand words could, in this case, be revised to say that a child's smile upon achieving something is worth even more. Gemm aims to foster this sense of achievement among elementary school-aged children (although the program is available to kids from K-12th grade), who are experiencing stumbling blocks with their reading skills.

Gemm, which has two other learning centers in Pelham and Scarsdale, N.Y., opened its Old Greenwich center in June. All of the centers also offer math help, SAT prep and a memory refresher course for adults.

Gemm Learning founder and Pelham resident Geoff Nixon couldn't be happier that his message is being spread to Fairfield County. He founded Gemm (formerly known as Westchester Learning) in 2006, and credits his son Matthew, 10, for getting the ball rolling. (The name "Gemm" incorporates the first letters for Geoff's name, his two children, Emma and Matthew, and his wife's maiden name, McCool.)

"Matthew had language issues and had trouble following directions," said Nixon. "We started him on a reading improvement software program called Fast ForWord. His progress was just incredible and his reading took off from there."

Nixon ran a hedge fund in New York City that owned stock in Fast ForWord. "I really wanted to find a way to offer this software to the public, as a service to help parents who were desperate for their kids to find an effective and relatively quick way to learn," he said. "It was a tough experience to motivate my son. I also wanted to help parents find an easy way to install the software, as it wasn't



Tina Liberatore, center director at Gemm Learning in Old Greenwich, demonstrates how the program's software works. A USB flash drive, right, provides an easy and convenient way to bring the Gemm Learning program to a home computer without having to download software to a PC.

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GEOFF NIXON  
FOUNDER,  
GEMM LEARNING



GREENWICH CITIZEN photos / Amy Mortensen

that easy to deal with it at home."

Nixon went to Scientific Learning, the company that produced Fast ForWord, and asked if he could license the software. He got the green light and the program has been helping kids make strides ever since.

Gemm Learning is the largest private provider of Fast ForWord. Four noted neuroscientists, led by Dr. Michael Merzenich, developed the software. It consists of interactive games designed to foster reading comprehension, which, according to Nixon, can "brighten the brain."

"The whole idea behind this program is that parts of a child's learning makeup can

Approximately two-thirds of Gemm learners complete the program from home and the rest come to the centers for help. Kids can also have Gemm Learning coaches visit them at home if parents feel that extra attention is needed.

### New Business Spotlight

**Name:** Gemm Learning  
**Address:** 1380 E. Putnam Ave.  
**Telephone:** (203) 292-5410  
**Web site:** www.GemmLearning.com.

Those who need more practice can extend the program with Gemm's Reading Series.

"This series targets areas of memory, attention, processing

and sequencing," said Liberatore. "It also adds reading components and is six to eight weeks long."

Gemm also offers Fast Math, a mathematics improvement program that lasts 10 to 20 minutes after a Fast ForWord session is completed.

Gemm Learning's programs aren't limited to kids. Adults can benefit, too, through the Brain Fitness program, which is targeted toward understanding, thinking and memory improvement.

The at-home Fast ForWord software is hassle-free. To use it, a memory stick is plugged into the computer.

Nixon said the program is typically geared to five days a week with an hour of practice each day, and was started to reach as many children as possible no matter what their means.

"When we began this, it really was a 'Robin Hood' idea to have viable centers and help as many children as we could," he said.

Gemm has, to that end, recently donated 10 scholarships worth more than \$16,000 to the Boys & Girls Clubs of both Greenwich and Stamford. The awards went to kids who were chosen on the basis of their need for the program to improve their skills.

"Our goal in the next two years is to have five kids on scholarship attending Gemm at any one time," said Nixon.

Gemm Learning also has a companion Web site, Gemm City. The site is available to participants in the program ages 12 and under. It's a safe site that kids can visit with their parents. The site allows children to have their own pages where they can talk to their coaches. There is a "brag board" for parents to write notes on their children's progress.

Kids can also earn points, either online or at a Gemm center, for progress they make. The two "elite" clubs that they strive for are

the 500 and the 700 clubs, each denoting the amount of points earned.

Tokens are awarded for points. "Kids can redeem the tokens at the student store for prizes, which are good incentives," said Liberatore. "Each prize is worth a certain number of points."

Each child gets a small safe to store the tokens. She pointed to a shelf lined with prizes, including everything from pens and notepads to clip-on trinkets for shoes. Older kids are eligible for prizes from iPods and radios to movie tickets.

Liberatore came to Gemm Learning in Old Greenwich having served as the director of its Pelham center. "The environment at Gemm is great for kids, because there aren't a lot of distractions," she said. "The program really helps heighten kids' self awareness and so many moms tell me that it's life changing."

"It's great for them to see that their children can make phenomenal progress, apply and retain what they learn."

One parent who can't sing enough praises for Gemm Learning is Pelham resident Sharon Yancey-Jackson. Her daughter Ashley, 9, had been having difficulty reading and Jackson was about at the end of her rope with frustration until Gemm came to the rescue.

"I had gone to her teachers and the principal," she recounted. "The school's programs weren't enough, and though she had been tested, there wasn't any improvement. She had a comprehension problem and didn't want to read, so first grade was very hard."

Fortunately, the Jacksons lived around the corner from then-named Westchester Learning, and Sharon went in one day and spoke to Nixon and Liberatore. "Geoff suggested that she get tested at Gemm," said Jackson. "After she started the program, her confidence just soared. She was doing so much better! Ashley really wanted to learn, and when she tested for third grade, there was such a noticeable improvement."

Ashley, who attends sessions at the Pelham Gemm Learning center during the school year and does the program at home in the summer, echoed her mother's praises for the program.

"I like going to school now," she enthused in an e-mail. "I'm not afraid any more to answer questions in class."

"I can do the program at home in the summer and that way, I can go to camp, too. My whole family is so proud of me."



Reward chips come in various denominations and can be "cashed in" for prizes sold at the Gemm Learning store.



be improved," he noted. "In the last 10 years, neuroscience has uncovered the amazing fact that learning ability is malleable."

The program, on average, lasts four to six months. Fast ForWord targets improvement in three main areas of learning: language, attention and visual issues.

"So many kids are reading at grade level but not achieving their potential because of lack of focus and comprehension," said Nixon. "We strive to improve that."

"Really severe cases we'd, of course, refer to a clinician. But, the vast majority of learning is auditory, and Gemm helps improve auditory ability early in life."