

**CLIENT:**  
Stepping Stone School

**BANKER:**  
Jon Eckert

# Turning Necessity into Success

## How Stepping Stone School grew out of one mother's search for quality child care

Rhonda Paver had always gravitated to leadership roles, whether serving as a resident assistant for university students or serving on the board of the Washington State Child Development Center. But when she first moved to Austin in 1979, she wasn't looking for another leadership opportunity. Like many parents of young children, she was simply looking for good child care.

Unhappy with her choices, she finally happened upon a day care center whose owner was ready to give up and do something else. With no plan and no previous experience running a business, Paver decided she was up to the challenge—and less than two weeks later, the first Stepping Stone School was born.

### GROWING BY LEAPS AND BOUNDS

"I did every job, including cleaning the rooms and making lunches," says Paver. "There were only two other kids besides my own." The center had an attached house where she and her family lived, and they were soon forced to give up their living space to accommodate the growing school. By 1982, through "sheer tenacity and determination," she had a waiting list.

Paver's remarkable resolve and resourcefulness—qualities she learned growing up in Alaska from her pioneering parents and entrepreneurial aunt—have served her well. Today Stepping Stone School consists of 17 child

development centers in central Texas, making it the largest privately - owned early care and education provider in the state. The newest school is scheduled to open in January 2008. In addition, Paver is now joined at Stepping Stone by her husband Bill, who brings extensive management skills and academic expertise to the business.

Widely respected for its nurturing environment, highly trained educators, and unparalleled standards of quality, Stepping Stone is considered an industry leader in early childhood development. It has been named "Best in Child Care" by the *Austin Family Magazine* Reader's Poll ten times.

Despite all the awards and acclaim, for Paver the true measure of her success can be summed up quite simply. "Parents trust me with their children," she says.

### KEEPING THE FOUNDING VALUES ALIVE AND WELL

The business has grown, but "the same founding values and principles still exist," Paver proudly notes. Among these values is a determination to own every property she operates.

After working directly with the previous owners to acquire the first two schools, Paver eventually sought outside funding with an SBA loan through Horizon Bank, which became Compass Bank in 1997. "I built a relation-

ship with Compass, and as the relationship progressed, they became our primary lender," Paver explains.

She admits to being a tough negotiator, and Jon Eckert, senior vice president and manager of Compass Bank's Commercial Banking Group, readily agrees. "She doesn't just take what's given to her, in all aspects of her business. Which of course is a great thing," says Eckert. "We've done some creative financing for them, and helped in other areas as well, such as their backroom operations and basic deposit-side services," he says, adding that the focus is always on the end result.

Paver continues her quest to bring locally owned, high quality care and education to families throughout central Texas. For his part, Eckert can attest to Stepping Stone's excellent reputation from personal experience. His daughter went there. He was especially struck by the unique learning environment Paver has created in her schools, which are staffed by employees who "are so dedicated and loyal, and love working for her."

Reflecting on her relationship with Compass, Paver observes, "I look at what other banks offer. Still, no one can match them. And the customer service is excellent. Jon works with us in lots of ways and really shows support."

She also sees a shared way of thinking. "Compass doesn't want to be the biggest bank, they want to do the best job. We march in concert on that one," she says, adding, "And like Stepping Stone, Compass gives back and is committed to the community. That's an important attraction for me." 