

A business in baby steps

Burned out physical therapist carves out a career childproofing Pittsburgh homes

BY SUZANNE ELLIOTT

Four years ago Kim Finkbeiner decided her job as a physical therapist was no longer fulfilling.

"I would come home stressed out and burned out," said Ms. Finkbeiner, who had worked as a physical therapist for five years.

"I started looking around and went to the Mount Lebanon library to do research," she said.

What piqued the interest of the Mount Lebanon resident was childproofing. As a mother of a 13-year-old son, Colin, and a two-year-old daughter, Kayla, Ms. Finkbeiner knew first hand what parents of toddlers worry about. Childproofing homes, she found, was a growing service nationwide, but no one was doing it in the Pittsburgh area.

"It is such a needed thing," Ms. Finkbeiner said.

So she got in touch with the International Association for Child Safety, a New Jersey based association of childproofers. She went to New Jersey for a week of training on techniques and safety equipment from the association. The association provides information, but is not affiliated with her business, nor does it grant any type of certification.

"I loved it," said Ms. Finkbeiner, who is not only a trained physical therapist but also holds a business management degree from Virginia Tech University.

In December 2000, Ms. Finkbeiner started Safe House, a name she later changed to BabyProofing Pittsburgh to better reflect what she does. It's her first business venture. On the job, Ms. Finkbeiner does comprehensive evaluations of homes or other child care settings. In addition, Ms. Finkbeiner, who works out of her house and has no employees, will install child safety products, like gates and electrical outlet covers.

During her inspection, Ms. Finkbeiner enters a home with her laptop. Using a software program developed by her husband, Robert — a computer programmer — she checks each room to see how it can be made safer for children. The software saves her from having to do handwritten estimates and is a time saver, she said.

"I look at things like electrical outlets and furniture and point out things that might be dangerous," she said. "This would include the chords on blinds, or electrical outlets or even doorstops. Kitchens and bathrooms tend to be the



Photo by D.M. Scott

SAFE BET: Kim Finkbeiner had never run a business before starting BabyProofing Pittsburgh, however she does hold a business management degree. Babyproofing Pittsburgh is not yet profitable, but Ms. Finkbeiner sees that changing in the near future.

most dangerous rooms in homes. In the kitchen, for example, there are dangerous appliances. There's always the possibility of a child turning on the stove and getting burned."

"Children develop a five-foot reach by an early age and they can move quickly," she said. "This is why it's important to have a guard on the dishwasher knobs. When I go through homes and point these things out, parents often say they never thought that those would be dangerous."

Ms. Finkbeiner charges \$50 for the inspection, which usually takes about two hours. She then prepares her estimate to complete the actual childproofing. Charges for that service can vary anywhere from \$200 to \$2,000, depending on the complexity of the job.

"I am hired 60 to 75 percent of the time," she said.

She said she likes her work.

"I like doing the installations more than the evaluations because of the physical

■ AT A GLANCE

BabyProofing Pittsburgh

Evaluates child safety problem and installs necessary equipment.

■ **Owner:** Kim Finkbeiner

■ **Location:** Her Mount Lebanon home

■ **Founded:** December 2000

■ **Web site:** www.babyproofingpgh.com

effort involved. The job makes me feel fulfilled because people will often tell me they're glad I was around ... I also have more power tools than my husband."

Beth Fowler is a medical social worker and the mother of a two-year-old son, Jack. She said she learned about BabyProofing Pittsburgh through a television news story.

"Because I am a medical social worker, I have seen too many or heard about too

many accidents that could have been prevented through babyproofing," said Ms. Fowler, who lives in the East End. "We were kind of radical because we got everything done and we live in an old house. She installed electrical outlet covers, eight gates, put bumper padding around the radiators. In addition, she also installed brackets to hold the dressers and put special knobs on all the cabinets. She was with us three full days and was very busy."

Ms. Finkbeiner said she has yet to recoup her \$15,000 initial investment, which covered equipment costs and advertising, but said she will begin turning a profit soon. So far, she said she has serviced nearly 200 clients.

"I love meeting people and their babies," said Ms. Finkbeiner, adding that she has no plans to franchise her business, but would like to do consulting work on child safety issues.

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