

## LOCAL BUSINESS

# Miracle worker boosts kids' performance, self-esteem

BY STEVEN M. THOMAS  
Staff Writer

Lynda Sloan-Allen's whole life led up to the job she is doing now, helping children she calls "learning different" find success in school and life.

Her tutoring and test-prep business, Make Your Mark in Life on Beachland Blvd., caters to a range of students from preschool children to adults returning to academia after years away. But kids struggling to learn and do well in elementary, middle and high school are her special focus.

The business was founded as Make Your Mark Learning Center on Royal Palm Pointe in 2000 by Vero Beach educators Jonathan and Michelle Sternberg. Allen joined the company as a tutor and manager in 2007 and bought the business in January 2010.

Since she took over, the test-prep side has diminished while tutoring of special needs children has increased.

"When I started, we probably had 300 kids being prepped for the SATs and ACTs and other tests," Allen says. "This past year it was more like 100. That is because I am drawn to the other part of what we do, helping children with autism, Asperger syndrome, ADHA and others who just learn in a different way.

"I told myself when I bought this business that I wasn't going to do anything anymore that I didn't love and that didn't love me back, and that is what I am doing," she says. "If you could see some of the kids who come in here – they give a visible sigh of relief when they walk through the door. There have been many times when I sit with a parent and child for the first time and before long all three of us are crying because it is such a relief to them to find somebody who understands what they are going through. It is not that they aren't studying hard enough or really trying. It is just that information comes to them differently."

"Lynda is a fantastic tutor," says Donna Concha whose daughter Susan 13, was tutored by Allen this summer. "Susan was four years behind in math going into eighth grade. She went twice a week, and Lynda caught her up over the summer. She is miracle worker.

"My daughter loves her. She really looked forward to going, and this is a kid who generally doesn't like school. Lynda is very uplifting to be around. She instinctively knows the right thing to say to the child – and to the parent – because we are worried too, just like our kids, about how they are doing in school. I can't say enough good things



Lynda Allen, owner of Make Your Mark In Life, tells Vero Beach High School senior Alicia Mello what the SAT is all about at the start of a tutoring session. Photo by Tom McCarthy Jr.

about her."

"Lynda loves kids and has a passion for helping them," says Jonathan Sternberg, who is now principal of Imagine South Vero, a K-8 charter school recently given an A rating by the state of Florida. "She has a knack for building relationships with children, who you have to have to motivate them, and she knows how to instill the self-confidence and self-esteem that are so important to doing well in school."

Allen began volunteering to help special needs kids when she was just 12 years old and eventually earned a master's degree in education from Miami University while working with Down syndrome children. "I always knew I wanted to be a special education teacher," she says.

After surviving a bout with cancer at age 28 that clued her into the importance of the role of diet to a person's wellbeing, Allen spent several decades working for non-profits in Martin, St. Lucie and Indian River counties.

Her holistic approach to helping kids includes teaching them basic cognitive abilities as well as study skills and specific knowledge.

"Many students actually have difficulty in keeping a working memory or maintaining a mental processing speed," Allen says. "But there are many ways to build those skills. I tell kids that the way we build muscle in our brain is the way we build muscle in our body. It is like practicing the piano or playing football – the more you do it, the better you get."

Allen says she directs children to sites such as [lumesity.com](http://lumesity.com) and [minddabble.com](http://minddabble.com) where games build memory and thinking skills while the kids have fun.

"All learning is visual," Allen says. "We see something before we learn it and I help children focus on the visuals. I tell them the frontal lobe is like the screen of their computer where they call up memories and information."

Kids coming to Make Your Mark in Life for tutoring in math, reading or other academic skills typically spend an hour a week at the center with a tutor who monitors their progress and assigns tasks to do at home.

The "learning different" children Allen works with come in more often and stay longer in an atmosphere she says is very caring and supportive.

"They come in two or three times a week for an hour or an hour and half," she says. "I am booked solid, every hour of the day all week long. There are so many learning different kids now, with the world evolving so rapidly with technology and everything else. Parents have a hard time even getting their kids

properly diagnosed, whether they are gifted or have difficulties. I work with the parents all the way through to help students get into the right programs and schools."

With school back in session Make Your Mark in Life is headed into the busy season for tutoring and Allen plans to hire more tutors.

"I am always looking for good people who want to help children shine," she says. "We want to show people it's not just academic tutoring. It is so much more than that. You can't be like specialty doctor. You have to help the whole person and the whole family."

"I found her two and half years ago when we were really struggling with my son's problems in school and she has made a big difference in our lives," says Jessica Kurutz, a mortgage banker with PNC. "She has been wonderful."

Kurutz says her son Bryson, now 11, was having serious academic difficulties and problems in the classroom due to inattention and hyperactivity.

"Lynda's input has been so much broader than just a pen and a piece of paper," she says. "We have uncovered a lot of underlying medical issues since she has been helping us and she is involved in all our meetings having to do with Bryson's IEP"

IEP stands for individualized learning plan and Allen has helped the Kurutzs and Bryson's school create a plan that makes life and learning more successful for him.

Baerbel O'Haire says she and her 11-year-old son have had "a terrific experience" working with Allen. "She helped Conor learn how to study and gave him the skills to learn more productively for his tests," she says. "That has resulted in higher grades and more confidence and a much happier camper." ■

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