

WONDERHERE: A LEARN AND PLAY STUDIO

How two SEU grads are reintroducing fun into the learning process

Tiffany Thenor and Jessica Zivkovich



It only takes a couple of steps through the front door of WonderHere to sense that this school is different. To your left, sewing stations with brightly colored ribbons and spools overlook Lakeland's main downtown thoroughfare. A few more steps lead you to the slides, swings, and rock wall perched beside a pretend market with a striped canopy. Lego creations and superhero capes adorn a wall nearby. With so many opportunities for play and discovery, it only seems natural that words like *inspire*, *wonder*, and *fun* would be painted along the back wall of the entrance.

The school's founders, **TIFFANY (SAMUELS) THENOR '09** and **JESSICA (VALDES) ZIVKOVICH '11, '18 (M.Ed.)**, already had more than a decade of combined classroom teaching experience when they decided to launch WonderHere.

"The more time we both spent teaching in the traditional school atmosphere, the more disheartening it became to be immersed in the unfortunate state of the current public school system. We absolutely loved children and teaching but could no longer be a part of the other nonsense, like putting standards and testing over children's individuality and creativity. Rather than simply complain, we chose to be creative (and possibly a bit rebellious, too) and committed to finding a solution to the problems we were encountering," Tiffany shared.

For Tiffany, the defining moment came while administering an assessment. A student in the front row piped up, "Another test? School is so boring!"

"I was mortified!" Tiffany recalled. "I texted his mom that very moment for an emergency meeting. After school that day when she arrived at my classroom, I let her know that I would be homeschooling

her son. Looking back now, I laugh. But that little boy and that sweet and trusting mama were our founding members of WonderHere and three years later are still our most active and dedicated family."

Jessica's "that's it" moment, as she calls it, was also connected to testing. As she prepared her third-grade students to take their first-ever state assessment, she watched their excitement and eagerness in August turn to stress and dread by testing time in March.

That same year, Jessica had the opportunity to attend an educational conference in Texas.

"On the way there, I devoured the book, 'Crushing It!: How Great Entrepreneurs Build Their Business and Influence — and How You Can, Too,' by Gary Vaynerchuk, and at the conference, I got to connect with some amazing educational companies. I knew there



won•der

noun, verb

To be curious to know something.
A feeling of surprise mingled with
admiration, caused by something
beautiful or unexpected.

was a market out there for something different, and as soon as I got home, I called Tiffany, ready to tell her my ideas (knowing she had some of her own)."

In the spring of 2016, they began offering "pop-up classes" at their church, hoping to get a sense for the community's openness to their play-focused learning philosophy. At their first-ever pop-up class, themed around the story of "The Three Little Pigs," the students read the classic tale as told from the wolf's perspective in Jon Scieszka's "The True Story of the Three Little Pigs." Then they reenacted it with puppets, analyzed the "crime scene" of the pigs' blown-down houses, put the wolf on trial, and finally created tiny structures with Twizzlers, toothpicks, and any other materials the kids thought might withstand the Big Bad Wolf's huffs and puffs.

"WonderHere is where the home meets the school. We are dedicated to cultivating a love of learning within the child, empowering parents to be the director of their child's education, and providing a fun, safe place for kids of all educational settings to learn and play."

Jessica and Tiffany were encouraged by the positive response from the parents and students. Some in attendance even pre-registered for future classes.

This confirmation fueled the pair's determination to turn what had begun simply as two college friends dreaming and scheming one evening into the bustling educational hub that WonderHere is today, with more than 70 daily students.

"Once we decided to go for this, we worked like a whirlwind to be ready," they said.

Jessica and Tiffany's own classroom experiences as students, particularly during their time at Southeastern, were an influential force shaping WonderHere's future teaching model.

Crediting the dedication and teaching styles of education professors like Dr. Amy Bratten, Dr. Patty LeBlanc, and several others, Tiffany said, "Their faith-infused instruction, their practical



and applicable lessons on managing, facilitating, and developing beautifully meaningful learning experiences for students, their personal investment in me as a student that continued after graduation ... these professors paved the way for Jessica and I to create WonderHere fully equipped and confident that we have the educational background to do this thing well."

For Jessica, it was Dr. Janet Deck's love for children, literacy, and the Lord that was most influential on her as a future educator. "She infused so much creativity into her lessons," Jessica shared.

After months of brainstorming, researching, crafting lessons, and transforming their newly acquired space in downtown Lakeland, the WonderHere team of half-a-dozen teachers opened its doors in May 2016 for its first official summer of educational camps. The focus was on reintroducing kids to the fun of learning, with five-day programs offered featuring names like "The Price is Write," "Survivor: S.T.E.M.," "Get Moving!" and "Reading with the Stars."

Midsummer, Tiffany reflected in a post on the WonderHere blog, "WonderHere is a studio unlike anything Lakeland has ever seen, and this summer has solidified in us something we already believed. There is a huge need for a location where kids can be creative, be given space to think outside of the box, and encounter learning nose-to-nose with their personal interests and abilities."

WonderHere has succeeded in providing just that kind of space. Now in its third year of operation, the school has expanded from its initial selection of summer camps to a variety of educational options, from six-week enrichment courses to a full-time, Finnish-inspired K-6 private academy, with all learning activities personalized to the individual needs of each child.

As the school continues to grow and more families join the WonderHere vision, Jessica, Tiffany, and their team are committed to maintaining the close-knit educational community they've enjoyed the past few years. "Our goal is for everyone at WonderHere to feel valued, connected, and in community with each other."

With a staff of 16 — eight of whom are SEU alumni — plans for the future include making strategic steps to allow more families to participate in a creative and intentional way as well as releasing an official WonderHere curriculum in 2019 for use by families and classrooms across the country.

Most importantly, the team is seeking God's hand to be on WonderHere's next steps.

Tiffany recognizes how He has already orchestrated their initial years, as well as those leading up to the school's launch: "God's fingerprints are all over WonderHere — from Jessica and I meeting junior year through a Southeastern volunteering opportunity with the Dream Center Lakeland to the many, many small and large ways the Lord has intervened and arranged for WonderHere to begin and grow and flourish. We could not have done any of this on our own. This God-breathed and really big God-size dream is only a reality because we stepped out in faith and continue to take faith steps every day."