

Autumn in MORRISTOWN

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The emphasis is on education and fun

With more than 35 years in Morristown, Learning Express Toys and The Teaching Room get high marks

By Karen Roettger | Special to The Star-Ledger

Don't tell the kids but toys aren't just for fun these days.

The toy experts at Learning Express Toys and The Teaching Room, located at 158 South St. in Morristown, are passionate about play and committed to helping their customers find the perfect toy for every occasion. But they don't stop there. You can also count on them to find toys and games with an emphasis on learning to support parents and teachers in the most important job there is, raising children.

The business is run by the mother-daughter team of Diane and Amanda Bowser. Formerly called The Teaching Room, which dates back more than 35 years, Diane and Amanda are the third caretakers/owners of this cherished family-owned business.

They pride themselves on assessing the play value of every toy that goes on their shelves, many manufactured from around the world, and guiding customers to just the right fit for their needs. When stopping by, don't be surprised to see Diane and Amanda playing around with the games or riding around on Plasma Cars. Become a regular customer and you will quickly become part of the family.

Diane moved from New York to Morristown when she married a local boy. She loved the town so much that she went on to raise two children there — who, like their father — are Morristown High School graduates. She's so glad she did.

"I love being a part of the Morristown community; it is so diverse and has something for everyone. The people of Morristown are very generous and are always looking out for their neighbors. COVID-19 has brought out the best in everyone in town and I am so glad we are here to be a part of that," Diane said.

After working in the insurance and banking industries for 20 years, Diane took a seasonal job with Learning Express Toys in Denville wrapping gifts. She fell in love with the business, the people and, of course, the toys, and bought the store. When the possibility to buy The Teaching Room in Morristown arose, the family bought that, too.

"Learning Express and The Teaching Room seemed like the perfect marriage," Diane said. "I was a frequent visitor to the Morristown store with my children and always loved the education value of play."

Amanda, a former visitor to the store with her mother when she was a child, started working at the store in high school. After graduating Marist College with a degree in biology and adolescent education, and then earning a masters degree in biology from Montclair State, she decided to put her education to use in the family business creating fun, engaging and educational activities for kids of all ages.

Amanda currently manages the store. Of utmost importance, now more than ever, she took the reigns in creating and boosting the store's social media presence. The online component came in handy in March when the pandemic caused the temporary shutdown of the business.

"2020 has provided us with new challenges and opportunities to evolve and grow," Amanda said. "Once everything closed in March, we had to quickly adapt and find a way to stay connected to our



Learning bundles are designed to make learning fun for students.

customers and most importantly continue to meet their changing needs," she said.

Families were overwhelmed with the seemingly overnight shift to their children learning from home and how to keep pre-school-age children busy. Add to that parents shifting their work to home as well. Learning Express Toys and The Teaching Room came to the rescue, offering contactless curbside pickup as well as delivery service to their customers, and did so almost entirely via social media, specifically Facebook and Instagram.

Now that September, and back-to-school is upon us, the store knows that this means different things to different students. Some will be attending in-person classes, others will continue with remote learning and likely many will experience both. Regardless, it's a time of year when parents and teachers take stock of what is most essential for children and how to best support their development. They would undoubtedly be wise to make a stop at Learning Express Toys and The Teaching Room.

Always known for its broad array of classroom decorations and resources for teachers, many customers come from as far away as Pennsylvania and Brooklyn, N.Y. to get themselves ready for the new school year. This has evolved over the years and in addition to school supplies, Learning Express Toys — The Teaching Room added toys with an educational value. Diane and Amanda are ready to help teachers prepare their classrooms and provide parents with learning bundles to assist with virtual learning and learning from home this fall.

It's always been a challenge to stay on top of trends and anticipate customer needs. In 2012 and 2013, it was Rainbow Loom. In 2016, it was fidget spinners. Now in 2020, it's face masks, hand sanitizer and learning bundles.



The store has always maintained a robust calendar of events including book readings and signings by local authors, visits from The Seeing Eye Institute and weekly Tiny Tot programs to engage their youngest guests, foster their creativity and assist in child development.

"With COVID-19 we had to totally change how we looked at in-store events. Our Tiny Tots weekly programs have moved to online via ZOOM," Amanda said. "The kids have actually loved it because they were able to see their friends online and an unexpected bonus was that our audience expanded to across the country."

There are other Learning Express Toys in New Jersey and across the country, but Learning Express Toys and The Teaching Room Morristown is a family-owned small business. To keep up with in store and online offerings, check the store's Facebook page at <https://www.facebook.com/learningexpressstoysofmorristown> For information, call (973) 540-8358.



Diane and Amanda Bowser run the Learning Express Toys and The Teaching Room.



Learning Express Toys and The Teaching Room is located at 158 South St. in Morristown.

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