



# FROM THE CORPORATE WORLD TO THE KIDS' ZONE

By Stephen Markley · Wednesday, May 11, 2011 10:00 a.m.



*In 2008, Jason Pullukat, 33, decided to move from his job in the corporate world at Kraft foods to become the owner of a franchise of The Goddard School® in Lincoln Park. Located on Armitage and Clifton avenues, the school—serving children from six weeks to six years—opened this past week. RedEye ‘Hoods sat down with Pullukat to ask him what it was like to make a drastic career change at the age of 30, and what it’s like to go from corporate meetings to running a preschool.*

## **Talk a little bit about your background in the corporate world. What made you make the switch to education?**

“My mom ran preschool centers, so I was always around it growing up. In 2007 I decided I wanted to get out of the corporate world and try something else. I saw the need for quality early-childhood education in Chicago. The trend was parents moving from the city to the suburbs for that education. There wasn’t a huge supply here in the city, and Goddard’s reputation stands for itself.

I’m focused on being in the office, on site every day, handling the payroll, the marketing, the advertising — the business, really. Usually schools have one director who has to wear two hats. Our educational director handles the curriculum, and I’m on sight at all times doing the business aspects.

I was doing both jobs for a while, and I didn’t leave Kraft until October 2010.”

## **Were you hesitant at all being a male in a predominantly female profession?**

“Being a younger male in this kind of profession, it was always in the back of my mind. But I talked to a lot of male [school] owners and asked how they felt. I don’t think there’s any negative perception about it, not like maybe there used to be. It’s the same trust: everyone’s coming in with a smile and leaving with a smile. Also, it’s that male role model that children can see even at a young age.”

## **As a young person, did it make you nervous to make such a drastic career move?**

“Any time you’re leaving what you know — which in my case was corporate America — it’s a big deal. You ask questions. It’s the same as going from Kraft to working at a newspaper; it’s a whole different industry. Now I’ve left what I know, I don’t have the paycheck coming in every week. Now every dollar I earn is based on how I perform.”

## **Why did you choose Lincoln Park for the school franchise?**

“We looked at 50 or 60 different sites and didn’t sign the papers on this location until the end of 2009. We began the construction shortly after, combining a vacant lot and an existing building on Seminary. Parents don’t expect a private institution on Armitage.

We definitely saw that demand [for private preschool] in Lincoln Park, and finding a place right on Armitage by the Brown and Purple Line — that’s the perfect location. You have many young professionals in this neighborhood. We want to convince them to stay instead of leaving for the suburbs.”

## **What does Goddard offer parents and children?**

“All of our lead teachers have bachelor’s [degrees] at minimum. We have that great location, private playgrounds (so we’re not taking 50 children to a park), library resources, and organic and local lunch options.

Then besides the core curriculum — math, science, writing — we have enrichment programs like sign language, yoga, music, manners, world cultures, art history and foreign languages like Spanish and Mandarin. And it’s all built into the tuition. We’re not a daycare. There’s a reason we have degreed professionals.

For the kids, we want to encourage that attention span and developing a love of learning. We specialize in play-based learning, so the kids will learn to write their names with their fingers in cool whip on a table. Or to teach them about art history, we’ll tape paper on the bottom of a table and let them draw while the teachers explain Michelangelo painting the Sistine Chapel. Stuff that makes it fun makes them want to learn.”

## **What advice do you have for other young people thinking about making a career change?**

“I was single back when I decided to do this. I didn’t have a family. Now I’m married and have a baby due in October. I wanted to get to the next stage but also wanted to be secure in my future, so it’s all about doing that due diligence, doing that research to make sure it’s a good fit and you’re not going to regret it. Now I spend part of my day playing with kids.

It’s much different than being in an office or flying to different cities every week for meetings. I have fun listening to laughter when I work and just having fun with the kids, running around on the playground. I never had a chance to do that for the last 12 years being in corporate America.”