

**Rainbow Station brainchild growing up / Child-care business that started in local strip mall has 16 centers across the country**

Richmond Times - Dispatch - Richmond, Va.

JULIAN BENBOW

Jun 5, 2006

Metro Business, News, F.7

*Copyright Richmond Newspapers, Incorporated Jun 5, 2006*

Timeout.

Amber Nease and Kaylea Wrenn glanced at each other for a quick second as if they had to double-check.

The question from "the newspaper dude" caught them off guard.

They were best friends, right?

They had been pupils at the Rainbow Station on Cox Road since kindergarten. They sit by each other during homework time. They stand by each other when they play dodge ball. They only go their separate ways when their parents come to pick them up.

That said, neither could muster an answer.

So classmate Elizabeth Ball, antsy as she noticed her mother waiting at the door to sweep her off to soccer practice, offered one for them.

"Basically, they're best friends," she said. "Now can we get back to playing dodge ball."

In a second.

Their interview wasn't done. They still had to tell "the newspaper dude" how the Rainbow Station had changed since they were toddlers.

"When we were in kindergarten we were in a different building," Amber said. "It was right across the street. But we needed a new place so they made a new one."

The first place was the brainchild of Gail Johnson, who stood in the doorway of the gymnasium smiling as the end-of-the-day dodge ball game turned into a mini news conference.

Johnson opened the Rainbow Station in 1989 in a strip mall on Three Chopt Road after 25 years as a pediatric nurse.

Experience told her that children with medical problems were essentially shut out of after-school programs, because, by law, parents were supposed to pick their children up from school or day care within an hour of the student being called sick.

"I wanted to do something to meet the needs of children that had issues that nursing could solve," she said.

Her idea was the Get Well Place, a special section of the Station where parents - regardless of whether their children were members of the after-school program - could bring sick children where they would "be in a situation as normal as possible."

It was like "sticking a round peg in a square hole," she said.

But she made it work.

The Station opened with 18 pupils. One had chicken pox. She couldn't have been happier.

"We fought, fought, fought to be able to provide this service," she said, "and on opening day somebody needed this service. It was like 'Yes!' "

Beyond that, she saw the Rainbow Station as a place where students could develop strong relationships with their peers and caregivers.

"We early in the history of our company determined that we were not passive caretakers," she said. "We were going to actively promote developmentally appropriate education to maximize each child's potential entrusted into our care."

Unlike traditional day cares that move students up after every birthday, the Rainbow Station kept them in the same small, focused groups from infancy to adolescence.

"The fact that we keep children together and only move them once a year is completely different from the way it's traditionally done. Every day they come and see each other so by the time they've been together for four or five years they have a really strong bond."

Johnson would eventually branch out, deciding 10 years ago that she would franchise the Rainbow Station.

There are more than 1,200 students at the 16 Rainbow Stations across the country. The Cox Road location now cares for about 350 each day.

"It's gratifying because as we often say in the company it's so easy to get fired up about what we do because it's for the benefit of the kids."

Johnson chatted with Cheryl Gray Ball as Gray Ball waited for daughter Elizabeth to finish the dodge ball game.

Gray Ball sent her son, now 19, to the Rainbow Station after school, and liked it enough to send her daughter after that.

"It gives them a structure," she said. "They have all kinds of activities that are entertaining and informative and also keeps them gainfully occupied."

It would be a while before Elizabeth would stop playing. She had Evan Truman on her team, and the kid had a cannon for an arm and a computer for a brain.

"We aren't allowed to pick favorites," said Bridgette Cox, a Rainbow Station director, "but he's a good one."

The Station was full of them, she said, but Evan was different.

Students leave once they turn 14, but Evan, an elementary schooler, is more than welcome after that.

"We joke that he's like an undercover teacher," Cox said.

It was almost time to go, but Truman, gray dodge ball in hand, had a few things to do before he left: Bean Amber, Kaylea and "the newspaper dude."

Time in.

## THE RESUME

Name: Gail Wine Johnson

Born: Oct. 11, 1944, in Warrenton

Position: CEO of Rainbow Station Inc. and its franchising company, PRISM, LLC

Education: Bachelor of Science, nursing, Medical College of Virginia School of Nursing, 1967; registered nurse, 1967; Master of Science, maternal child nursing, Virginia Commonwealth University, 1976; certified franchise executive, 2006

Family: Husband, R. Earl Johnson; sons, Brian Edward, 35, Kevin Earl, 34; daughter, Kathryn Johnson Wiley, 30; grandsons, Abel and Cyrus Wiley; granddaughter, Isabella Johnson

Fun fact: Loves the beach and traveling anywhere

Contact staff writer Julian Benbow at [jbenbow@timesdispatch.com](mailto:jbenbow@timesdispatch.com) or (804) 649-6495.

CORRECTION: \*\*\* CORRECTION PUBLISHED JUNE 10, 2006, FOLLOWS \*\*\*  
The Rainbow Station location that was the subject of Monday's Trade Names feature in Metro Business is at 11001 Three Chopt Road. The article had an incorrect address. One franchise of the concept exists elsewhere in the country, and 15 others are in the site-selection stage or under construction in the U.S.