Early on in her career, founder and CEO of Rainbow Station Gail Johnson learned that nurses do business differently.

Johnson has spent the last 40 years as a pediatric nurse, focusing her work on helping to improve the lives of sick children and children with chronic illnesses. After receiving a master’s degree in maternal child nursing in 1967, Johnson started working in the field, where she noticed a recurring trend: both parents entering the workforce, leaving no one to take care of their sick children. Seeing the stress that this scenario repeatedly put on parents, Johnson became determined to create a solution.

In 1989, Johnson launched Rainbow Station, a leading center providing early childhood education and emergency backup care, as that solution. The business was initially conceptualized through the Get Well Place, described by Johnson as a haven for mildly ill children whose care needs would otherwise necessitate a missed day of work for mom or dad.

"You cannot isolate children with illnesses or special care needs in an environment where they are surrounded by other kids with similar problems," Johnson said, reflecting on her vision for the birth of Rainbow Station. "Instead, you must nurture these children by putting them in an atmosphere with healthy and happy children."

However, her plan for Rainbow Station evolved as she immersed herself in the early education industry. There, she noticed a gap in the quality of offerings provided across the spectrum of childhood education. She realized that she could fill this gap by drawing from her nursing experience, and that combining her two fields of interest—education and wellness—was the key to making her business successful.

"In nursing, there is a system and a procedure for everything," said Johnson. "You are constantly documenting your actions and making sure that all your decisions reflect the process that has already been established. When I launched Rainbow Station, I carefully wrote down the plan and established a similar procedure for the business."

Johnson also thanked her nursing experience in helping her develop the necessary interpersonal skills for business ownership.

"I knew that if I could comfort a parent of a dying child, I could do anything," she said.

This acknowledgement led Johnson to build a business grounded in reality, but driven by positivity.

Launching its franchising unit in 2000, the Glen Allen, Virginia-based Rainbow Station has since grown to encompass 10 schools across the United States and one school in Shenzhen, China. The brand is planning to add 110 additional schools in China and to expand internationally over the next five years.

Furthermore, Johnson’s ideas are now gaining traction in Virginia. For example, Richmond-based companies are now using the Get Well Place as a benefit for employees when their children are sick and need care.

However, Johnson thinks it’s unlikely that other concepts will be able to replicate Rainbow Station’s unique business model.

"Rainbow Station is a product of my own experience. No one can or will figure out how we have combined both early education and wellness into a successful business.”