

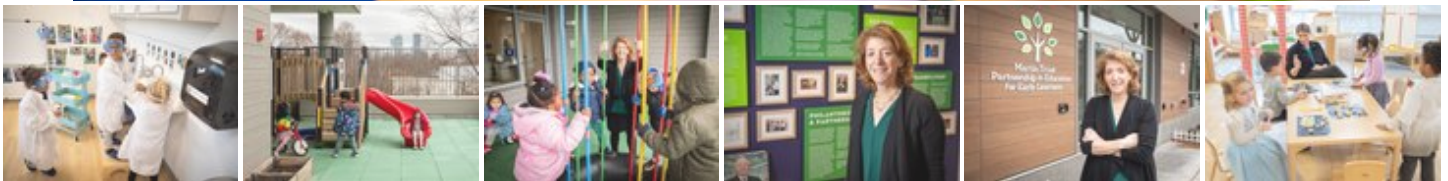
Career & Workplace

Finagle A Bagel owner finds her second passion



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Laura Trust with students participating in a science experiment at the Martin Trust Partnership in Education for Early Learners, which the Finagle a Bagel owner founded.



By **Grant Welker** – Projects Reporter, Boston Business Journal
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For someone who grew up in one family business and made a name for herself with another, Laura Trust is most passionate when she’s talking about something else entirely: early education.

Trust, who owns Finagle A Bagel with her husband, Alan Litchman, has taken an interest in the field for more than two decades, ever since her son, Sam, was 2.

Sam was nonverbal, so she took him to a medical specialist who, in Trust's telling, gave the family a discouraged feeling. At 3, Sam enrolled in the Brookline Early Education Program where an instructor – she still remembers his name, Barry – said he could tell Sam was smart and capable, even if he couldn't speak yet.

“It was the first time someone told us what Sam was capable of, instead of what was wrong,” Trust said. “They gave him the tools he needed to succeed.”

All these years later, Sam is in his 20s and doing great. And Trust has opened her own early education center in Brookline that gives students the type of head start that she says is too often lacking.

Trust bought an old Victorian that housed a series of small businesses and embarked on a plan to turn her passion into reality.

The Martin Trust Partnership in Education for Early Learners opened at the end of 2021 with the aim of both creating higher-quality early education and making the program available to lower-income residents who wouldn't otherwise be able to afford costs in one of the most expensive regions of preschool in the country.

“This goes back 20 years,” she said of the idea for the school.

The center, in a modern, five-story building on Harvard Avenue between Brookline Village and Coolidge Corner, is named for her late father, the founder of the apparel maker Mast Industries and an MIT graduate who today has an entrepreneurship center at the college named after him. Martin Trust died in 2019 at age 84.

“Dad instilled in me about education and giving people a start,” Laura Trust said, stopping while giving a tour of the center to show a section of wall in the lobby dedicated to her father. It includes Red Sox memorabilia thanks to his ownership share in the team when the group led by John Henry bought the team in 2002.

The elder Trust first went to the Cooper Union, a college in New York that was the only place he could afford, his daughter said. He later went to MIT's Sloan School of Management after receiving a scholarship for just one semester.

‘Ready to help’

The school named in his honor now seeks to do the same for kids ages 3 to 5. Early education doesn't receive as much attention as high home prices in the Boston area but for many families, it's a large hurdle.

Middlesex and Norfolk counties, which combine to make up much of the Boston area's northern, western and southern suburbs, were some of the most expensive in the country for early education at an estimated average of nearly \$28,000, according to a U.S. Department of Labor Statistics report issued early this year. Suffolk County was

more than \$24,000 – 28% of a family’s income on average. Rural areas of the country often have costs well under \$10,000.

The Trust Partnership in Education for Early Learners is small, with just 60 students. But Trust in her team are hoping they can create a model that can work elsewhere.

A detailed plan guiding the center’s educators was written by Vicki Caplan Milstein, the former principal of the Brookline Early Education Program. Trust was also able to bring on board a former Canton school superintendent, Jennifer Fischer-Mueller, as its head of school.

“We’d love to do a hundred of these, a thousand of these,” Trust said of giving guidance to other early-education centers. “We’re ready to help.”

In the meantime, the center is providing an education for students in its four classrooms, each staffed by three educators. Students place a badge with their name on different areas of the classroom so they have autonomy to, say, draw or read without those areas becoming too crowded. Each room is quiet and a minimalist decor is calming and helps kids focus, the educators say.

There’s a library and a typical playground except this one happens to have views of the Back Bay skyline from the fourth floor. A full-time chef works out of the kitchen making three-course lunches – yes, preschoolers get an appetizer, main entree and dessert – each day.

One recent day, the menu featured a morning snack of pancakes with honey compound butter and a starter of semolina flatbread with apple chutney. A entree of beef goulash with sides of buttered noodles and braised red cabbage is followed by shortbread cookies for dessert.

The kids may focus on the great food but the adults running the center are engrossed in giving the students the strong educational start they say each deserves. Organizational skills and social competency are major predictors of success later in life, Milstein said, and it’s a phrase that Trust herself says a few times.

Fischer-Mueller left a district with more than 3,000 students to lead the Brookline school, and she said she’s passionate about what it offers students.

“I strongly believe that this is the answer,” she said in an interview in what the school calls its maker space.

Milstein had just wrapped up filming a brief video she was preparing to show at an industry conference. A series of mittens tied along a string each had a number, though placed in random order. The kids were tasked with ordering them properly.

Trust, herself an MIT graduate along with her husband and father, has developed enough of a passion for early education that she can sound like someone who made that a career instead of the retail world. She speaks highly of early educators who she said aren’t given the same respect or pay as K-12 teachers and advocates for a strong early start for students – or else she says they may never catch up in later years.

“So many kids struggle because they don’t get to school ready to learn,” she said.

Finagle’s future

Trust has been devoting much of her time to the school at a point when Finagle A Bagel is at something of a break.

The company, which Trust bought in 1998, happened to close a number of retail locations before the pandemic hit and then its production building in Newton in 2021. Today, a shop on Boylston Street in Copley Square is the company’s only retail location.

“I think we shrunk at the right time,” Trust said, sitting down at a conference table on the building’s top floor.

Instead, Finagle’s bagels are found in more than 1,200 grocery stores along the East Coast, with Market Basket and Publix its biggest chains. The pivot toward grocery business was crucial early in the pandemic when nearly everyone had to resort to shopping at grocery stores at the expense of dining out.

“Now, it’s kind of a reset,” Trust said.

That could be soon changing, though there isn’t any firm timetable. Rents are still high despite vacancies, she said, so Finagle is being choosy about where it may go. So far, locations in Brookline and Chestnut Hill have been eyed.

As she’s turned her attention toward higher education, Trust knows she may have a decision to make at some point with the business. She has children who are young adults, and Trust said she wants the company to live on in some way after her time is done.

“I want my kids to do what my kids want to do,” she said.

In the meantime, a strong grocery business is keeping Finagle humming along, albeit more quietly than in the past with less of a retail footprint of its own.

“Business is back to pre-covid levels, which is wonderful,” Trust said.

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