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SOUTH SHORE ENTREPRENEUR: PENNY CASTAGNOZZI and NANCY TELIAN: Products help children recognize sounds in words

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By ANDREW LaVALLEE

The Patriot Ledger

One says she's a frustrated musician. The other calls herself a frustrated artist.

Together, they're applying their creativity to a line of educational products that help children learn how to read.

The two sisters, Penny Castagnozzi and Nancy Telian, launched their Reading with TLC workshops after the success of their first product, Lively Letters. The women run their company, Telian-Cas Learning Concepts Inc., from its office in Telian's Stoughton home.

Lively Letters, which they introduced in 1990, is a set of flash cards for each letter of the alphabet. Each card incorporates an illustration and a story as part of the letter, which helps children match them to sounds.

For example, the letter "f" has a dragon drawn around it. The dragon bites his bottom lip to breathe fire, Castagnozzi said, and when students imitate him, they sound out the letter.

Telian got the idea for the cards while working as a speech pathologist, when a student who was unable to differentiate "p" and "b" suddenly caught on when Telian started drawing pictures around the letters.

She began testing the cards with other students, and with Castagnozzi, they completed a 6-year pilot testing in Boston schools in 1996. After 30 45-minute sessions in about two months, elementary school students with reading disabilities increased their awareness of sounds in words by an average of two grade levels. Oral reading skills increased by one and a half grade levels.

Since then, the sisters have incorporated their firm, which does business by the Reading with TLC name.

In recent years, Reading with TLC has developed posters and coloring books, expanded the line of Lively Letters cards and added music to the mix. Letters now have corresponding songs, with music by Telian and lyrics by Castagnozzi. When students are looking at an unfamiliar letter, the teacher can hum the tune as a hint.

Recognizing sounds in words, also called phonemic awareness, is the core skill they teach, Telian said, and it is a fundamental part of reading. Once students have mastered the cards, she said, they move quickly to unadorned letters, then words, then books.

Their workshops educate teachers about how to use their products, as well as more general concepts about how to use phonics to help develop reading skills. Teachers have traveled from as far as Venezuela to attend, and Reading with TLC products are now used in 46 states and seven countries. Telian and Castagnozzi also tutor students from their Stoughton and Weymouth homes, respectively.

The two sisters love ribbing each other, which livens up their presentations.

"She's much older than me," Castagnozzi, 47, said of Telian.

"She says that at every workshop," Telian, 51, said, a hint of big-sister exasperation in her voice.

Between the banter, drawings and music, students and teachers forget they're studying.

It also comes as a surprise to many of their workshop attendees that both sisters share a congenital visual disorder called retinitis pigmentosa, which has gradually narrowed their field of vision. Not only hasn't it stopped them, but Castagnozzi said it also propelled her to work even harder. When she or her sister accidentally knocks over an easel during their workshops, it adds to their stand-up routine, she said.

Entrepreneurship runs in the family. Their two other sisters, as well as their father and grandfather, are also business owners. Castagnozzi said that neither of them would have done it alone and will stop the minute the other quits.

"And we don't get sick of each other," Telian said.

"Well," Castagnozzi said, grinning, "I get sick of you sometimes."

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