

# Growing Room opens first franchise

NEW AUBURN CHILD-CARE CENTER WILL SERVE 225 CHILDREN

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Growing Room Inc., the Columbus company launched nearly 20 years ago by a pediatric nurse, is ready to grow again -- and in a big way.

The string of child-care development centers on Monday opened its first franchise in Auburn, Ala., a 15,000-square-foot facility that will serve 225 children in the Auburn-Opelika area.

But more are on the way, with Sheree Mitchell, president and chief executive officer, planning to take her Growing Room Child Development Centers nationwide.

It will be slow going at first, however.

"I'd like to see us sell another two or three this year and get those up and going and just kind of slowly ramp it up," Mitchell said. "I do not want to put us in a position where we can't deliver the support that franchisees will need after they open. We've got to plan that support for them."

Growing Room, headquartered in the Northlake Centre office park, has four child-care centers in Columbus. The company's flagship facilities are on Manchester Expressway and Bradley Park Drive. It also operates two "Imagination Station" centers for Aflac, a supplemental insurance firm with 4,000 local employees.

The franchise system has been in the works about a year, Mitchell said. The process included forming a separate corporation, Growing Room Franchising System Inc., and hiring a franchising veteran, Dan Adelstein, as senior vice president.

Adelstein is formerly with the Regis hair salon and Lawn Doctor franchising systems. He has spent the last three months setting up franchise disclosure documents, manuals and training criteria. He also has started advertising the franchise system, primarily via the Internet, already receiving about 30 inquiries from across the U.S.

"It's got to be the right fit, because you've got to find somebody that follows a system and doesn't want to recreate the wheel," said Adelstein, who estimates 1 or 2 inquiries out of every 100 leads to someone actually purchasing a franchise.

"You want somebody that wants to take what has been built over many, many years and buy into it because they know that their chances of being successful are a lot better than trying to do it on their own or maybe with somebody else," he said.

The price tag to start a Growing Room center can range from less than \$200,000 in a leased building to more than \$2 million when a structure is purchased or built from scratch, Mitchell said.

The center in Auburn, located at 644 North Dean Road, cost nearly \$2.6 million, she said. It has an enrollment capacity of 225 children.

Growing Room didn't have to look far for its first franchisees. A former senior vice president, Laura Smith, and her husband, Mark, bought the Auburn franchise.

"She handled business operations for us, got involved in some center issues and just kind of did a little bit of everything," Mitchell said. "So she was ready and poised to do this."

Though no deals have been inked with anyone, Mitchell said other markets she would like to enter with the franchises are Warner Robins, Ga., and perhaps Montgomery and Birmingham in Alabama.

Growing Room Inc. employs 200 and cares for about 1,200 children in Columbus.