

Kristine Erice

Port Saint Lucie, Florida



[Exceptional Academy for Differently-Abled Learners](#)

Learn about Florida Entrepreneur Kristine Erice:

After relocating to Port St. Lucie from Georgia in 2015, Kristine Erice, Rhode Island native and founder of Exceptional Academy for Differently-Abled Learners Inc., spent the next five years homeschooling her autistic son. Eventually growing frustrated with the lack of educational opportunities for children with autism and other learning challenges, Erice and her husband decided to take matters into her own hands.

“We actually started the process in August 2019,” she said. “We knew there was a need for this type of a school and decided it was time to get started. I’m not one to sit around until someone else comes up with a solution.”

Erice continued, “We held a comedy show fundraiser to kick things off and raised over \$17,000. Once we had the money, we found a building

and went through a long process to get it rezoned. From there we remodeled the building and worked on getting approved by the Department of Education to be in a position to accept the state scholarship programs. We had a long checklist of things to get done, but we did it. In fact, we were up and running in less than six months from the time we got started.”

The Exceptional Academy for Differently-Abled Learners welcomed 15 students in January 2020. The private non-profit school specializes in providing a custom curriculum for students in first through sixth grade. Children are grouped by ability – as oppose to grade level – and the layout is very open and inclusive.

“In addition to the essential educational curriculum, social skills and life skills classes are taught daily,” Erice said. “These social/life skill classes are part of our full-time program as well as our part-time home-school enrichment classes. These skills will help children to become more independent and empower students to move towards the mainstream of society. Integrated Applied Behavior Analysis (ABA) Therapy is also offered in house and is available through select insurance providers.”

According to Erice, the school “got off with a bang”. She utilized social media and reached out to behavior therapists and special needs families to get the word out. Because there is such a need for these services, filling the 15 available slots wasn’t very difficult. In fact, there’s already a waitlist. Nevertheless, there have been a handful of challenges.

“Without a doubt, the biggest challenge so far has been COVID-19,” Erice said. “When March rolled around, we came to a complete halt. It was

tough, but we quickly made changes and developed a distance learning program for our kids. It wasn't easy, but it worked. By June, most kids came back for our 8-week long summer program. By August, we were open again for regular school."

Erice's husband serves as CFO of the school and handles the financial and accounting side of the business. She's the person that serves as the face of the school and interacts with the parents. Together, they come from a place of love and empathy – having worked through many of the same challenges faced by the parents.

"They trust us because we've been through the same things they're going through," Erice said. "They know we understand how hard it can be. Our parents are so pleased and thankful they have a place where their kids are loved and accepted."

Looking ahead, Erice and her husband are focused on expanding beyond the sixth grade and increasing the number of students at the school. To accomplish this goal, they will need to increase the size of their facility. They'd also eventually like to add housing and vocational programs for older kids to help with job placement and training.

"Autism doesn't end at 18," Erice said. "My biggest fear for my son is what's going to happen to him after he's out of school. I want to make sure he has a purpose in life. Other parents with autistic kids feel the same way."

Erice offered some great advice for aspiring entrepreneurs and for those looking to start their own non-profit school. "Generally speaking, you have to be prepared for anything," she said. "Along the way, never take

no for an answer. Being assertive, rather than aggressive is the way to go. When we first started this journey, I was intimidated by the long list of things we had to do. However, I took it one day at a time. I was passionate about it and knew it would happen.”

Erice added, “In terms of specific advice for someone looking to start their own non-profit private school – you need to research as much as you can in order to know what you’re talking about. Along the way, you’ll encounter a lot of people that will steer you in the wrong direction. Become your own expert and get comfortable with what’s required to position yourself for success.”

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