

The Tutor Doctor makes house calls in RI

By MEG FRASER

Patti Avin had a good job and a nice home in her native New York, but when both of her children moved to New England and started families of their own, she knew she had to make a change.

Fast forward a year and a half, and Avin was in the same boat once again. She was living in West Warwick, close to her daughter and just a short drive from her son living in Connecticut, but her job as the Director of Account Management for Small Business at United Healthcare left her little free time. She was seeing less of her kids than when she lived on Long Island.

It was time for another change, and this one brought the Avin family in a direction they never anticipated.

"In October of 2009 I decided to resign to spend more time with the kids," Avin explained. "I didn't want to go back to corporate. I wasn't getting that warm and fuzzy feeling, and I wanted to do something where I could make a difference in somebody's life."

Avin began looking into buying a franchise. When she stumbled upon the Tutor Doctor, a program that began in Canada and is growing its American base, she had an instinct she had found the right match.

Although Avin has never taught before, she can relate to the needs of parents with struggling children. She has four grandchildren, and recalled her experiences with a tutor for her son. She would shuttle him back and forth to sessions multiple times a week, often waiting in the car while he was taught in a small classroom environment.

"All I kept thinking about was how great would it have been if I was able to make dinner in the kitchen while my child is being tutored in the living room?" Avin said.

Tutor Doctor is a one-on-one program that puts tutors – all of whom have received federal criminal background checks – directly in the homes of families. The business model impressed Avin, who soon reached out to the company. She was equally impressed by the level of support the home office offered.

The opportunity would



THE DOCTOR IS IN: Patti Avin and her daughter, Stefani Reilly, show off their wrapped car that advertises the Tutor Doctor, a new Rhode Island franchise that services Johnston and the surrounding areas. (Sun Rise photo by Meg Fraser)

mean Avin could work from home, while performing a service that had the potential of helping students and their families. She bought the franchise rights in May, becoming the first Tutor Doctor in the state.

"I need flexibility," Avin said. "I'm not in it to make a million dollars, but I'm willing to give it my all."

In August, Avin prepared to go to training to get the business off the ground. She convinced her daughter, Stefani Reilly, to come along for the ride.

"I'm so happy I went with her. If I hadn't gone with her, I wouldn't have the same enthusiasm," Reilly said.

The training was in Canada for six days from 7:45 a.m. to 6:30 p.m.

As of right now, the Tutor Doctor franchise has free reign within Rhode Island, and tutors are available to visit students statewide. In the event another franchise opens, Avin has exclusive rights to Johnston, Lincoln, North Providence, Smithfield, Greenville, Harrisville, Mapleville, Chepachet, Pascoag, Oakland and West Warwick.

Sessions are priced in groups of 12 to 144, and can be customized beyond that. It is recommended that new clients take two, one-hour sessions each week for six weeks, but the program is flexible.

So far, Avin and Reilly have interviewed and hired nine tutors with various specialties. Building up a cache of tutors was a priority for the mother-daughter team,

before even considering taking on a client.

"Every tutor that I hire, I want them to be as passionate about this business as I am," Avin said.

Tutors in her franchise also get a \$25 referral fee if clients who sign on mention their name. Existing clients who make referrals that lead to new students will also get a \$25 gift card of their choice.

With the economy in a bad spot and many people out of work, Avin has been blown away by the quality of applications she is receiving. She has multiple interviews every week and her inbox continues to be flooded with inquiries.

"They are an amazing caliber. I'm very impressed," she said.

A degree in education isn't required, but many are retired teachers or students finishing up their teaching degrees. Before making a placement, Avin said it is important for her to interview both the tutor and the student to see if personalities will work well together. If she has a young boy who loves sports, for example, she would like to find a male tutor with a similar interest who can relate to the student on a personal level as well as a teacher-student relationship.

"I'm looking to make a magical match with the student," Avin said.

Stefani agreed, saying that tutoring shouldn't feel like school all over again, which is part of the draw for the individual attention.

"I think it's easy if a kid needs a math tutor to get a

math tutor, but the kid doesn't necessarily look forward to that meeting," she said. "We want them to be waiting at the door or with their books ready."

Teachers in traditional classrooms, she said, have a large group of students to handle and – understandably so – don't have the ability to reach out to every student. That's where Tutor Doctor can supplement classroom learning.

Shy children, for example, could struggle at school.

"Shy kids won't ask questions, but this isn't raising your hand in front of a whole classroom full of people," Reilly said.

Tutors are encouraged to reach out to the student's teacher in order to stay informed on what the child is working on. Tutor Doctor provides letters to tutors in order to establish that connection.

Down the road, Avin envisions opening the service to seniors for technology classes.

For now, though, she's busy marketing the program. Tutor Doctor visited last weekend's Apple Festival, and they are sponsoring a bowling team as well. Most of all, Avin is happy to be getting off the ground on a business she feels so strongly about.

"My excitement has not diminished at all," she said. "It's going to take a while but I'm getting the word out and we're ready to go."

For more information, call 626-6122 or visit www.yourtutordoc.com/pavin.