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By Sarah Metcalf

Wanted: Baby sitters with class

Genevieve Thiers started her company with a dream, some fliers, and a whole lotta blisters.

The Brookline native, then just 24 and freshly graduated from Boston College, had an idea in 2001 to revolutionize the way families find baby sitters by creating an electronic database using profiles and postings to match parents and sitters. But the corporate backing from investors just wasn't there -- a modern-day version of "The Baby-sitters Club," they called it, and said it was doomed to failure.

"All of the people I talked to were men, and I remember thinking, 'Get your wife in here, she will understand what I'm saying,' " Thiers said. So she took matters into her own hands, canvassing every college campus in the Boston area, at the expense of her feet. "I put fliers in a backpack and just flied all the dorms."

Four years later, business is booming for her brainchild, Sittercity.com, with more than 100,000 baby sitters registered across the nation. And changing diapers and playing hide-and-seek has become a viable option for college students looking to earn some extra cash without waiting tables or running price checks. And it pays -- well.

Rates can run anywhere from \$10 to \$15 an hour, and even higher depending on experience and qualifications. Compared with the \$6.75 minimum wage some students pull in, baby-sitting doesn't sound like just a job for suburban teenyboppers anymore.

"I think, quite frankly, what it comes down to is the money is there," said Thiers, who speaks from experience. Thiers says she baby-sat her way through BC, managing to pay off a good chunk of her tuition with the money she earned. "Not only is this a legitimate industry, but there's a huge amount of money in it."

Within a month of posting all those fliers on area college campuses, Thiers had received over 600 responses from students looking to register with her site, as well as 30 families who were interested in finding a sitter. That was just the tip of the iceberg.

"It just exploded," she said.

Today, thousands of sitters and parents from around the country log on to her site each day, with over 1,700 sitters registered within 10 miles of Boston. Parents and sitters

provide personal profiles, with general information about themselves. Sitters can post their credentials -- CPR-certified, nonsmoker, has a car, etc. -- and personal details about themselves for free. Parents pay a \$40 registration fee and for \$5 a month can browse through profiles and send messages to sitters who appear to be a qualified match. Sitters may also sign up to receive daily e-mails about job postings in their area.

The idea of matching the cash-hungry college workforce with families desperate for child care is such a natural that a number of similar services have cropped up, both nationally and locally. One such site, Babysitters.com, is similar to Sittercity -- for a \$40 initial fee and \$8.95 a month, parents can search profiles of sitters in their area and contact them if they're interested in an interview. Around 200 Boston-area sitters are registered with the site, the majority of them college students. Baby-sitting, Thiers said, used to be a strictly word-of-mouth business, with friends and relatives relaying names of reliable sitters around neighborhoods. Putting the process of finding a sitter online allows parents to immediately log on and post a job when discovering a sitter is needed.

"What was good about Sittercity, it allows us to access a larger pool of applicants in a short span of time for us to compare and contrast," said Amy Hurley, 37, who lives in the South End. Hurley said she and her husband are first-time users of Sittercity, and are interviewing potential sitters for their 4-month-old daughter.

For parents, cost savings

Although some parents may be wary of finding sitters through an online service, screening steps are in place to ensure only safe, qualified sitters belong to the site, Thiers said. Sitters are required to give at least one reference to register on Sittercity, and parents almost always schedule interviews with applicants before hiring them. In the four years of the site's existence, Thiers said, she has never heard of a problem.

In addition to using national online sites like Sittercity.com and Babysitters.com, many college students work through more traditional child-care agencies, such as Nanny Poppins, founded in Marblehead in 1995, which now serves much of Eastern Massachusetts. Jennifer Bouchard, the agency's president, said about 75 percent of her workforce is made up of college students.

"I love them, because they are doing this because they're interested in children; they're not just doing it because they think they can make money in between classes," Bouchard said. "People that don't love children are not going to apply to be nannies."

Agencies can be expensive for parents, creating a backlash that helped encourage Thiers to start her significantly cheaper Web version.

Nanny Poppins charges over \$2,000 for a six-month registration -- and that doesn't include fees or the nanny's salary, which can run up to \$18 an hour for sitters and over \$400 a month for live-in nannies.

"Sittercity has really changed my life," said Rebecca Miller, a Newton resident who has been using the site for three years. "After paying thousands of dollars at agencies and using very ineffectual techniques like ads in the newspaper, I discovered I could find lots and lots of the kinds of people I was looking for, and I could find them in a way that was proactive instead of sitting back and waiting."

For sitters, though, working through an agency rather than a website can be more financially and emotionally beneficial, said Jill Lovely, 24, a Northeastern University senior who sits for a family in the Back Bay. After trying out Sittercity, she found she could make more money and felt more comfortable functioning through an agency.

"The woman who runs the agency -- she's a sweetheart, and she actually knows her nannies on a one-to-one basis," Lovely said. "And I feel safe going to a family because she's talked to them on the phone beforehand."

With a reputation, not entirely undeserved, for outrageous dress and body piercings, busy schedules, and love of the nightlife, college students wouldn't be the first choice for a sitter in many parents' minds.

But they offer a demographic that is ripe with experienced sitters, Thiers said, many of them certified in CPR and first aid, as well as having a few years of maturity under their belts.

"The teenage neighborhood baby sitter is not a possibility in the city," said Lauren Lapat, 37, of Jamaica Plain, who is still using the baby sitter she found on Sittercity three years ago. "You end up not knowing what your options are, and for someone who doesn't want an older person, your hope is to find a college student. There's just something about the energy and enthusiasm the young people bring."

The nose ring is free

Lapat said she and her friends used to call Boston-area colleges directly, but the response was almost nonexistent. After registering with Sittercity, the Lapats interviewed several candidates and chose a student from the Massachusetts College of Art. She sported a nose ring, but no one seemed to mind.

"My daughter called it a ring nose for the first six months -- we all thought it was hysterical," Lapat said. The family even attended one of the sitter's art exhibitions. "Our sitter carried the kids around and introduced them to everyone."

Becoming close with the children and the family is one of the perks of sitting that might not accompany another job. Rather than clock-watching, many sitters look forward to spending time with the family they sit for, and vice versa. Lapat said when her sitter graduated and landed her first full-time job, she asked to work only four days a week so she could continue baby-sitting.

"She's become such a huge part of our lives, we couldn't picture her not being around," said Lapat.

Although baby-sitting is usually a job associated with females, Thiers said some of the best sitters she knows are men. And there was a time when it was more common to find males in the baby-sitter labor pool than these days, she said.

A female domain

"Young girls who wanted to earn money and be independent -- they kind of considered them hussies," Thiers said of the old social order. "Around the 1970s, there was this huge shift, guys just fell by the wayside." She added that only about 2 percent of her site's registered sitters are male.

Many jobs are located in the city, but in the suburbs, transportation does come into play. Some agencies prefer that their sitters have cars, and sitters on Sittercity list in their profile whether they have access to a car and how far they are willing to travel to a job. Many times, families seeking a sitter from Nanny Poppins are willing to lend out a car as long as the sitter has a good driving record, Bouchard said.

Since a car can be too expensive an amenity for a Boston collegian to possess, some sitters use the MBTA or alternate forms of transportation to get to work.

"I ride my bike," said Jill Lovely, the student who sits for a Back Bay family, "and when it got stolen at Northeastern, the husband [of the family] took his old bike out and sold it to me at a very discounted price."

Finding a sitter is a problem almost every family faces at one point or another, Thiers said, and is a problem that the corporate investors she spoke with severely underestimated. But for her, and the sitters registered on her site, the investors' oversight is their financial gain.

"We've proven beyond a doubt that baby-sitting is a standard industry -- it's cool, it's hip," Thiers said. "And it's us laughing all the way to the bank in a lot of ways."