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Sittercity.com to the rescue

Boston and its surrounding suburbs may be one of the best places to live if you're looking for a babysitter. It's packed with college students looking for part-time jobs.

The question for many parents, however, is how do you find that perfect sitter, the one who's great with your kids, available exactly when you need her and isn't allergic to your cat.

Genevieve Thiers, a Brookline resident and 2000 graduate of Boston College, has found the answer. It's sittercity.com, the Web site she launched in October to help parents find sitters and to help sitters find jobs.

Parents pay \$39.99 to join sittercity.com for one year. They can then log on and browse the lists of sitters who have registered with the site. Sitters register for free and fill out personal profiles. Parents can search by the times they need the sitter to be available, by college, by whether or not the sitter has any allergies, and any number of other criteria.

Sittercity is a lot cheaper than some big agencies that help parents to find sitters. That's because some of the big agencies train their sitters and send them out to parents directly.

Sittercity is different, Thiers said. "We're dedicated to helping parents find sitters," she said. "We don't screen out sitters," she explained, and Sittercity does not take responsibility for what ultimately happens between parents and sitters. Rather, parents call and interview sitters themselves and make arrangements with the sitters themselves.

The site encourages parents to call references sitters have listed in their profiles, to use the sitters for short time as "mother's helpers" before giving them an actual job, and to use the site's feedback feature. At Sittercity, parents can post feedback about sitters for others to see, and sitters can post feedback about parents.

Times when the site could be especially useful, Thiers said, is during the holidays and over the summer, when most college students go home. "Summer is a sitter drought," Thiers said. To help parents, Sittercity compiled a list of sitters available during the holidays and is planning to compile a similar one of sitters available in the summer.

Thiers first got the idea for the site while she was still in college. Her freshman-year roommate introduced her to one of the first parents she babysat for in this area. She took the job, and, she said, “the next day I got two calls [from parents looking for sitters],” she said. She took one of those jobs and that parent referred her to other parents and she got even more calls. It was at this point that she realized what a huge market for babysitters there was in the Boston area and how difficult it was for parents to find them. “A lot of parents had resorted to putting up signs around colleges,” she said.

It took two years of planning and working at other jobs that gave her the income she needed to launch her business, but last October the site finally became a reality. She started by signing up the sitters. She ran Sittercity tables at area colleges, where she advertised the site, handed out lollipops and encouraged sitters to sign up. Her alma mater, Boston College, wouldn’t let her have a table, so it was a little hard to get sitters there at first, but 100 of Simmons College’s students signed up. Harvard gave her a cool reaction too. “So we flyer’d the heck out of it [to advertise the site to students],” she joked. Now there’s a good number of Harvard students signed up sitters on the site.

Then Thiers signed up 10 parents she knew from babysitting for free and advertised the site to other parents everywhere she could think of. She contacted the Newton Mother’s Forum, she handed out flyers and she advertised her site through agencies such as Warm Lines, which helps parents to find child care in the Boston area.

Already, she’s expanding her services to other areas of Massachusetts and to Rhode Island. Her primary co-workers in Boston are Chief Technology Officer Daniel Ratner, who Thiers has a lot of business experiences and who coached her through many logistics of getting the site started, and Customer Support Representative Mark Cohn. She also has representatives working for her in Western and Central Massachusetts and in the Worcester area. Soon, she thinks, the business may expand to Chicago, and, if Thiers has her way, it will become a national service.

“Babysitting has been my life,” Thiers said. She and her twin sister both of whom are 23, are the oldest of seven children and spent a lot of time babysitting their younger siblings when they were growing up. So she knows a lot about the service she’s providing.

But babysitting isn’t the only thing that is Thiers’ life. She is also an aspiring opera singer, and she started the Web site partly because it would be compatible with an opera singer’s lifestyle. “I do this simultaneously with operatic training,” Thiers said. The Web site now takes her only 10 to 15 hours per week.

“Opera singers live in a state of being perpetually broke,” Thiers said. With the Web site, she’s hoping to avoid this.