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By Maja Beckstrom

## Online service brings parents, sitters together

Boston College graduate Genevieve Thiers remembers seeing a pregnant mom trudge through campus one day posting fliers for a baby sitter. She thought, there has to be a better way.

After graduation, she came up with one: a Web site called Sittercity.com, which matches parents with college students seeking baby-sitting jobs. The site boasts the largest database of sitters in the country and recently started recruiting users in the Twin Cities.

“We’re basically like an online dating service but for parents and baby sitters,” Thiers said.

Students post a profile at no charge and include contact information as well as references, rates, hours available, a personal statement and such details as whether they know CPR or any foreign languages. Parents may post their own profiles and search the site for a fee of \$39.95 for the first month and \$5 for subsequent months.

Thiers, 26, is the eldest child in a family with seven children, including two sets of twins. So, as she put it, “baby-sitting is in my genes.” She worked her way through college by baby-sitting and every time she took a job, she’d get more referrals.

“I’d go home, and there would be a message on my machine from another mom, ‘Oh, I heard about you from Cheryl, could you baby-sit Saturday?’ And I started passing jobs off to friends,” she said.

After Thiers graduated with a double major in English and music –she wanted to be an opera singer – she worked a year for IBM to save money. In 2001, she single-handedly posted 4,000 fliers seeking sitters at Boston’s colleges and universities. Within a week and a half, 600 had signed up, and her business was born.

Sittercity, which is now based in Chicago, operates in Providence, New York, Cleveland, San Francisco, Chicago, Seattle, Dallas and Minneapolis and St. Paul, where so far, nearly 800 students and 250 parents have signed up. Washington, D.C., and Baltimore and Philadelphia will go online in September.

The service includes an option for parents to leave feedback on sitters that is visible only to other parents. Sitters can rate parents and can sign up to receive a daily e-mail list of job openings.

Some parents might balk at the idea of finding a baby sitter through the Internet. Tara Briggs was initially wary of trusting her 4-year-old son to the care of someone she met online. But her reservations disappeared after she spoke with several students.

When Briggs first moved to the area, she didn't know anyone who could help with child-care. At one point, she says, she had to ask her gardener to watch her son. Now she has two sitters from Sittercity that she relies on. "It's really saved my life," says Briggs, of Minneapolis, in an e-mail interview.

"If you can find someone by word of mouth, that's fantastic. We thoroughly recommend you use them," Thiers said. "We're for people who don't really have those networks or people who don't want to use someone in high school."

And what parent wouldn't like these job applicants?

Allie Ragan is a 21-year-old nursing student at the University of Minnesota who plans to pursue a pediatric specialty. She baby-sits a 9-year-old and an 11-year-old and is looking to pick up another family or two over the summer.

"I've been with the same family for two years and absolutely love them," she said. "I drive them around and watch them play soccer and maybe we go out to dinner or go see a movie. It's not even baby-sitting, it's a fun night out."

A quick search in St. Paul turned up a male University of Minnesota psychology student who knows sign language, a female Hamline University psychology student who speaks Spanish and is a CPR tutor, and a Macalester College student who worked five summers as a camp counselor and was a supervisor of her church's nursery.

The site says it accepts only students who are 17 and older or recent graduates. Screening potential sitters is up to parents.

"It's an intriguing idea," said Carol Rohde, executive director of Resources for Child caring, which helps parents find child-care in Ramsey County. "But I would really check those references. I'd want to meet the sitter in person for an interview, and I would ask my kids, 'What did you think? Did that look like someone you would have a good time with?'"

As for Thiers, she knows first hand the Internet's power to bring people together. She met her boyfriend of three years on Match.com.