

Susan Wilkins:

I had all these ideas of what I was going to be. I knew I had to go to college, but I didn't know what for. I just knew that my whole life everyone said, "You got to go to college. You got to go to college."

I went on and I became an x-ray tech and I did x-ray, ultrasound and CT in several different hospitals for several years. But anyway, I went back to work, it took me forever to find childcare. And I finally did and it really just not was what I thought it should be. And so every day, I would cry when I'd have to leave my child and just pray that he was safe and he was protected until I got back to him. Well then I was at work one afternoon and I ultrasounded myself because I had back pain and I found that I had a tumor and it was cancerous, so went and got it taken care of and it was time to go back to work and I just told my husband, "I'm not going back to work. I may not live to raise my baby, and I'm going to stay home with him." My husband said, "Well, okay, that's what you want to do."

That's when I started taking the childcare classes. I contacted a lady named Shelley [Hinnahan 00:01:18] in Fort Smith, and she was, "Yes, we have all these classes." And she was so helpful and encouraging, so I went there. It seems like I was in Fort Smith every day for a class or something, but I wanted to get all the knowledge I could because I knew how to take care of a baby, or I thought I did, but I learned so many things that those classes that helped me with my own child. I wanted those classes so that I could be prepared to give whatever child that came into my care the best care that I could give them.

We renovated, we put a kitchen, a bathroom, everything that was dedicated to that childcare. I opened up and had my first child in December of that year and I thought, oh, man, I live a little ways out of town, I don't know if kids will come, but they started coming and it's 16 years later and they're still coming. My husband's recently retired and back when the pandemic hit, he was, "Susan, this is a good time just to close and the parent's will understand." And so I thought about it and I was, well, right now is not a good time because this is the normalcy that my kids know. We've not missed a beat during this pandemic. We've been very blessed, very fortunate. We've closed one time for a positive case, it was a short time, parents were very considerate, very helpful.

I'm still open, parents still come in. I've had maybe one or two drop out for a little while, but they came right back and I love this. It's not like I say, oh, gosh, I've got to go to work in the morning, it's never been that. It seems like I'm always burning the candle at both ends, but I can say that my kids, my families, they are what keep me happy. Whenever I think about not having them every day, it doesn't seem normal.