



# Leslie Lancry 39 President, founder, Languages Stars LLC

Leslie Lancry watches silently as a 2-year-old boy in a Brian Urlacher jersey makes his way to a Spanish class at her Lincoln Park language school. On the wall behind her, an ambitious mission statement declares Language Stars will revolutionize how and when American children learn language and foster a generation of multilingual Americans.

She's had that goal since she was 18, when she decided to open a French immersion camp in her parents' house as a summer job. To recruit 4-year-olds as her students, she mailed fliers to their parents using a purloined school directory. She got one response. "I guess these people didn't want an unknown 18-year-old American teaching their children French all day," she says, still amused at her naiveté.

Undaunted, Ms. Lancry — who speaks French, Russian, Japanese and Spanish — demonstrated her full-immersion technique to the one parent willing to entertain the idea. Communicating solely in French, she relied on body language, exaggerated facial expressions and visual cues. The woman was so impressed she encouraged friends to bring their children. Ms. Lancry ended up with

eight students. "Those kids were speaking French by the end of the summer," she says.

More important, Ms. Lancry had found her calling. "I knew in some way, shape or form I wanted to immerse American children in language," she says. "I said to myself, this is what America needs."

Ms. Lancry began mapping out a plan to create full-immersion programs for children as young as 12 months. "I recognized that I needed the skills to build an organization of scale," she says. So she got her MBA from Harvard in 1995, did a summer internship at New York-based investment firm Merrill Lynch & Co., and spent four years at Boston-based management consulting firm Bain & Co. "My focus was totally on strategy: how to take a concept and make it replicable and successful."

**10:30 TO 11:30 A.M.**  
The busiest hour of the day at her language centers. Students are coming and going, and the halls are filled with the sounds of pint-sized linguists.

At age 29, with her French husband in tow, she finally felt ready to launch the business. She rented space in Lincoln Park and Winnetka and taught the classes herself. Word spread, and the 40 students she started with grew to 4,000 this year. One of them is Chase Taylor, who entered the school at age 2. Like Ms. Lancry, the 8-year-old has become obsessed with language. He speaks Spanish, French, Italian and German, and is now learning Chinese.

"A year ago, he said he wanted to learn Polish. My wife and I just looked at each other. How did he know about Polish?" laughs his father, Charles Taylor.

Ms. Lancry has a staff of 75, 50 of whom are teachers recruited from abroad. The profitable business generates annual revenue of \$4 million and holds classes in its eight locations as

well as in 60 public and private schools throughout the area. But Ms. Lancry isn't ready to stop.

She's gearing up to expand nationwide, using \$1 million in capital from angel investors, including Avi Stein, managing partner of Chicago-based private-equity firm Willis Stein & Partners LLC.

"More parents are recognizing this is a good service, and I think the business has the potential for growth," Mr. Stein says.

Ms. Lancry plans to expand into 10 to 20 metropolitan areas and to reach others via instruction materials, including CDs. "I don't think it can ever finish," she says.

Alyssa Wolpin, her college roommate who is now a lawyer in Manhattan, agrees. After all, Ms. Lancry is the woman who took flash cards with her when she went jogging in college so she could study Japanese. "She is very focused," Ms. Wolpin says.

By Sarah A. Klein  
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