

CITY BEAT

THE SUNDAY SITDOWN WITH LAUREN KENT

MOTHER OF INVENTION

Lauren Kent and a friend started an online group to help other young moms like them

In 2014, a couple of women on the South Side started a Facebook group for young mothers like themselves. Lauren Kent and Shanya Gill-Gray figured: Who better to help moms out than others like themselves? They've helped turn the Moms of Beverly group into a networking force. Kent, 30, a Hyde Park native who has lived in Beverly for eight years, spoke with the Chicago Sun-Times about what they created — and how social media helped empower them and other young moms. **AS TOLD TO SANDRA GUY, FOR THE SUN-TIMES**

QUESTION: You wanted to provide free resources and a safe online space to other moms like you. Were you surprised at the response?

ANSWER: I remember celebrating our first 70 members and thinking that was amazing. In just two years, it's grown to 2,600 members. That really blew my mind.

The fact that the steady growth came through word of mouth was just beyond me.

Q. What's the most popular feature?

A. Recommendations. Moms are always looking for advice — such as for a pediatric dentist, a nanny or baby sitter, a friendly restaurant to take a 3-year-

old to, activities for 1- to 3-year-olds in the dead of winter.

Q. What's new with Moms of Beverly?

A. We've had moms who've posted that their sister or someone they know needs everything from a bassinet to baby clothes. For one young mom, I gave away a playpen, and other members donated clothing, a stroller, supplies for the baby's room. It was an overwhelming response.

Now, we're trying to have more of a purpose. This is our first year running "Operation Joy," a toy drive. Two of our members said they could connect the group to more than 300 local families in need. We're recruiting members,

asking if they want to donate or sponsor a family for the holiday season. So many women are "gifting" kids the kinds of things they could never have otherwise.

Q. What would you advise others interested in starting a similar group?

A. Have clear expectations for what you want to happen. Make sure you have a good team. Our group has three administrators — myself, the co-founder and Tina Peterson, a super-active member.

Make sure you have the time to build a successful group in a safe space. No one wants to be part of a group where she feels unwelcome. It needs to be free of personal biases.

VIDEO ONLINE

Moms of Beverly co-founder Lauren Kent talks about the group's evolution, at chicago.suntimes.com.

We did have our few stumbles. Moms would want to report crime in the neighborhood. Racial tension got inserted. We'd remove those posts. We would contact members and tell them, "We don't want you to speak about religion, politics and other divisive issues because it can quickly go all the way wrong."

After a November fatal shooting of a 25-year-old African-American man by off-duty police in Mount Greenwood, we announced, "This is not the place to spew hatred,"

basically. It became very racially divided. There is a strong police presence, including police families, in Beverly and Mount Greenwood.

We made sure to say, "Hey, if anyone feels she doesn't support community, diversity or welcomeness, you need to leave." The response was overwhelming, with all of the moms saying, "Thank you for saying this." They were really happy that they knew the group was welcoming and diverse.

You see a lot of negativity

on social media. Knowing we have a group who can remain so positive and inclusive speaks volumes to me, and I'm proud to be a part of it.

Q. You're a former elementary school teacher, now mom to Jacob, 6, and Jackson, 3, with a third son expected this month. What are some activities you've learned about that are your favorites?

A. The Children's Museum in Oak Lawn, especially now that I'm at home all day with my 3-year-old. It's

not expensive. Parking is free. It keeps his attention.

Local libraries host free sessions where children read, do arts and crafts and dance and sing. Park districts have lots of free activities.

Another favorite is Ellie's Café in Morgan Park. There's a play area inside.

I've also taken my 3-year-old to Jump Zone in Chicago Ridge, with inflatable slides and the bounce house, especially when winter gets brutal.



JAMES FOSTER/FOR THE SUN-TIMES