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Working on early childhood centers makes architect's job fun

Lisa Chronister, 38, spent six years in New York but is back at LWPB Architecture, as a principal in the firm, working mostly on classrooms and other spaces for early-childhood education.

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Imagine designing space for work and play as comfortable for the Munchkins as for the handful of full-sized men and women in Oz — and dress 'em all in cowboy hats and boots.

Now you're thinking like architect Lisa Chronister has been since she returned to Oklahoma City from New York City.

Chronister, 38, spent six years in New York but is back at LWPB Architecture, as a principal in the firm, working mostly on classrooms and other spaces for early-childhood education. She and her husband, Aaron Mooney — and baby Eli, 8 months old — moved less than three months ago.

Chronister, who grew up at Fittstown, just south of Ada, hit the trail running — the famed Chisholm Trail, which is the theme for the new Bill Wallace Early Childhood Center for Chickasha Public Schools. Construction should begin by the end of this year with the school open by fall 2012, she said.

The library-media center is the Trading Post. The dining room, of course, is the Chuckwagon. The gym is the Corral. The hallway is the trail itself. Classroom clusters have names like Mustang Mesa and Roadrunner Ridge and others that rely on animals associated with the Old West — to pique children's interest.

The Chisholm Trail, which passed through present Chickasha, became the theme for the project early on. How to make it relevant to the prekindergarten and kindergarten pupils?

"What do little kids care about the Chisholm Trail? It's the Old West. But what do little kids care about the Old West?" the design team wondered. The brainstorm brought the animals of the Plains and prairies to mind, she said — and all little kids like animals.

Architectural design for early childhood education, Chronister said, requires dealing with the intersection of two distinct physical scales: people "under 36 inches, and how

they use space,” and zones and spaces for teachers. Even the small scale has to be applied to large spaces such as gyms, dining rooms, libraries and other common space, she said.

Working mostly on early childhood, K-12 and higher-education designs, the core of LWPB Architecture's work, represents a different career trail for Chronister, who holds a bachelor's degree in architecture from the University of Oklahoma and a Master of Architecture degree from Pratt Institute.

"My specialty for years was that I have no specialty. I've worked on so many different project types," she said, often on "the untraditional stuff."

Over 16 years of practice, she led the design of a variety of office, cultural, sports, laboratory and other facilities. Most recently, she was a principal at Helpern Architects in New York City, where she led the firm's renovation work at the Dag Hammarskjold Library at the United Nations Headquarters.

What brought her back to Oklahoma? With baby Eli, she said, "We realized we needed a slower pace of life, not to mention proximity to grandparents. We bought a great bungalow in the Las Vegas neighborhood (southwest of Pennsylvania Avenue and NW 23) and are enjoying the nice neighborhoods and quiet streets."

Something that hasn't changed, she said, is her enjoyment of her work.

"I've been telling people — especially since I got back — I'm embarrassed at how fun my job is. It's embarrassing," she said. "I always thought that in life if I had a job where I could draw buildings all day long, that's what I'd like to do."



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