

SUNDAY BREAKFAST

She gives them their money's worth

■ BY DAVID SWEET

After leaving a lengthy career in Chicago finance, where she worked for both Northern Trust and Bank of America, Susan Beacham visited her daughter Allison's first-grade class. The youngster was learning Latin.

"I said, 'If she can learn Latin at this age, she can learn more about money than just making change,'" recalled Beacham.

Around that time, the Lake Forest resident and her husband, Michael, launched Money Savvy Generation. The 14-year-old business is geared at teaching elementary-age children the basics of money management.

"It's great to teach them when they're young—they listen to you. Money is a provocative topic," says Beacham, sitting in the conference room of the four-employee firm's Lake Bluff offices. "The ability to delay gratification (by not spending) is not in every child's DNA—it is learned behavior."

Central to the business is the Money Savvy Pig. While most piggy banks feature one slot, this colorful, see-through device—which Beacham created after a dream about it—possesses four: one each for savings, investing, donations and spending. Stickers help children decide what to do with the cash once a chamber is full.

She brought the first Money Savvy Pigs to a gift show in Chicago—and was soon doubting her decision.

"Next to me is the Beanie Babies booth. People are screaming, 'I want 10,000!' No one wanted mine," Beacham said.

While teaching classes about financial management to students at local schools, she faced more challenges.

"The parents would say, 'Who are you to teach our kids about money?' Beacham recalls. "I found parents can be insecure about what they don't know. I teach their kids something, they ask their parents about it, and the parents get uncomfortable."



Susan Beacham

ILLUSTRATION BY BARRY BLITT

Counting more than one million kids who have been influenced by Money Savvy Generation, Beacham says her next target is young couples.

The product she'll pitch is the Marriage Saver (yes, there's a double meaning).

"A lot of young couples aren't taking advantage of 401ks or Roths—they don't think about the future," Beacham says. "Divorce is the gateway to poverty. And what do people get divorced over? Money."

For those who doubt Beacham practices what she preaches, her daughters Amanda and Allison (who attend University of Illinois and Miami of Ohio, respectively) need to pay their own expenses at colleges, including sorority dues and clothes. In fact, Beacham told Amanda she couldn't attend her first-choice college at \$60,000 a year because she'd be saddled with debt when she hopes to start a career in special education.

Both Amanda and Allison (who upon receiving her first pay stub asked, "Who the heck is FICA?") started receiving allowances at age 8—as long as they agreed to a written contract pointing out Mom would no longer cover school lunches, toiletries and other expenses.

"Hand a dollar a week to a kid for allowance? That's absurd," says Beacham. "When in life does

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someone say, 'You're 55. Here's \$55.' You have to put in boundaries."

Today, Money Savvy Generation's principles are taught in more than 150 schools. When one considers how early advertisers, video-game makers and others try to persuade kids to spend, Beacham believes it's good for them to understand, as the cliché goes, that money doesn't grow on trees.

"I show them how to spend wisely, how to have needs versus wants," says Beacham, citing a Cambridge University study that money habits are formed by age 7 to emphasize the importance of training. "I tell them 'Savings without a goal is like football without a touchdown. It's boring.'"

The Money Savvy Pig is sold around the world in different languages, as Beacham counts distributors in Switzerland, Australia, Japan and more. She has added football- and soccer-shaped banks, along with Moolah the Money Savvy Cow.

Beacham — who likes to have a Sunday breakfast of French toast and burned bacon ("I must not be alone — the waitresses look at me knowingly") at Full Moon in North Chicago — has enjoyed nationwide publicity, appearing on the Dr. Phil Show twice and being noted in a Wall Street Journal story last year. She has written a few books — "Home Sweet Home," which addresses a child's concern when a parent loses a job, and "Penny Power," which is about compounding interest.

Regarding her own money situation at her business, the chief executive officer sighs.

"Every year we do well, but it's a struggle. I go out hat in hand every day for grants," she says. "I often say I do thank the Lord for this great idea, but I also wish he had contributed the MacArthur Foundation." ■