

## Inside Track

### A purpose-driven career suits Agnew just fine

Alissa Lane - Special to the Business Journal  
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From the time she was young, Valencia Agnew, founder and owner of Adolescent & Family Behavioral Health Services, was drawn to the field of psychology. There was only one thing holding her back.

"I'm such a crier," said Agnew. "I thought I should probably pursue something else."

That realization led her to establish a career in accounting. After receiving a dual major in business and computer programming, Agnew worked her way to a position as a junior controller.

Despite her professional success, Agnew never felt completely comfortable with the career path she was on. Though the decision was met with reservation from her family and friends, Agnew returned to school to first pursue a degree in psychology and later a doctorate.

"I knew it would take a long time before I remotely made that much money again," Agnew said, jokingly. "But I knew this was my purpose. Once you know that, what's the point in fighting it?"

Upon graduation, Agnew began working at North Kent Guidance Services. Her time there shaped her as a counselor and allowed her to build strong connections in the community, including her friend and manager, Dorothy Berg, Ph.D.

Though she was very content at NKGS, she had a desire to own her own practice.

"There were always multiple reasons why not to do it," said Agnew.

But after suffering through some hardships in her family — the untimely death of her sister and her mother suffering two strokes — Agnew came to the conclusion that she needed to stop making excuses for not living her life the way she wanted.

Since opening her practice, Agnew is in some ways still waiting for reality to sink in. "I kept thinking, 'Shouldn't I be scared? Shouldn't I be nervous?' I'm still waiting for the worry to come," she said.



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Valencia Agnew's decision to enter into a counseling career was initially met with skepticism by her family and friends, but she persevered and opened her own practice.

Agnew attributes her smooth transition into business ownership largely to the various connections she made in the Grand Rapids area. She is a big believer in giving back, personally serving her community by giving presentations at schools and hospitals and providing pro bono counseling to military personnel and their families.

Through her time at North Kent Guidance Services, her extensive volunteer work and her time spent in accounting, Agnew had developed a network of professionals within the school systems, courts, foster care services, medical facilities and business community at large.

Although she had this network to draw on, Agnew realized there were aspects of starting her business in which she would need help. When she felt her marketing efforts needed assistance, she hired a marketing coach, David P. Diana. When she decided she wanted to be able to communicate better with her Spanish-speaking clients, she hired a personal language instructor and interpreter.

"Running a company efficiently means respecting people who are experts in their field," said Agnew. "I decided my clients were worth the investment, and I was worth the investment. It wasn't always the cheapest, but it's been well worth it."

From the start, Agnew knew it was important to her to stay focused on a few areas of specialization.

"I need to be trained by the people that are the best in the industry. I can't do that if I'm a jack of all trades," said Agnew.

Among her many areas of expertise, Agnew's practice specializes in borderline personality disorder, self-injury and trauma, and it also offers adolescent, family and couples therapy.

If Agnew feels a patient could be better served somewhere else, she doesn't hesitate to pass along the referral. When patients come to her with eating disorders, for example, she refers them to a specialist in the area. She notes that this system doesn't take business away from her practice; it simply allows her to stay focused on her areas of expertise and for her patients to receive the best treatment.

Agnew also applies this focus to her marketing efforts. When she was approached by someone who wanted her to place an ad for her business on pizza boxes, she declined.

"As business owners, we shouldn't be marketing just to market," she said. "I didn't feel like that kind of marketing honored my clients."

Agnew has found that the most effective marketing efforts for her business have been the ones she feels fit her personality. One such effort has been a partnership with local photographer Jennifer Deming in a project called "Self-Esteem Photography," a therapy technique designed to improve the patient's self-image.

Each week patients are asked to attend a brief personal portrait session with themes such as "exploring your inner child" or "body appreciation." Agnew said the technique can be highly effective in fostering a more positive image of self.

One area of need that Agnew has seen grow since the economic downturn is for those who suffer from what's known as "financial trauma."

### Valencia Agnew

**Company:** Adolescent & Family Behavioral Health Services

**Position:** Owner

**Age:** 48

**Birthplace:** Grand Rapids

**Residence:** Kentwood

**Family:** Husband, Darron; children Vincent, 24, Paige, 19, and Carty Ayair, 2

**Business/Community**

**Involvement:** Give An Hour; Junior Achievement; Forest Hills, Rockford and Grand Rapids public schools;

American Association of Marriage and Family Therapy;

American Psychological Association; Michigan

Psychological Association;

Michigan Association of Play

Therapy; National Registry of

Marriage Friendly Therapists;

Psi Chi National Honor Society for Psychology.

**Biggest Career Break:** Deciding 20 years ago to leave an accounting position as junior controller and return to school for two psychology degrees.

"They're happy just to have a word to attach to what they're feeling," said Agnew. She notes that for those who've lost their jobs or are experiencing financial crisis, knowing they're not alone is imperative.

In opening her own practice, Agnew said she couldn't have done it without the support of her family. Agnew said she has a supportive husband, Darron, and three loving children: Vincent, who plays football for the Miami Dolphins; Paige; a published writer; and 2-year-old CartyAyair.

Having an understanding family has helped her business succeed.

"They've eaten a lot of carry-out dinners," she said.

In developing herself as a therapist, Agnew has met more than one personal struggle of her own along the way. Having been raised in a fairly conservative church, many people close to her had a hard time accepting what she has chosen as a profession.

"They see Jesus as the counselor," said Agnew.

She said that making the decision to continue with this career "took me knowing that people in church need someone to talk to, too."

When one of her first patients pulled her aside and told her what a difference she had made, Agnew knew she had made the right decision.

"To me, it's an honor," Agnew said of working with her patients. "It's a journey that they're going on, and they're allowing me to walk beside them and see the world as they see it."

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