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Darling Nikki

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Nikki Darling-Kuria is a home child care provider and won an award from Scholastic Early Childhood Today magazine. She works with Kevin Varndell and Jack Sherman-Sleppy on projects at her kitchen table.

Doug Koontz

PRING RIDGE -- To the children she works with, Nikki Darling-Kuria is "Miss Nikki," someone who plays with them on the floor, shows them how to do new things and feeds them snacks. But Scholastic Early Childhood Today, a national magazine for early childhood professionals, named Ms. Darling-Kuria a winner of the 2005 Early Childhood Professional Award.

Ms. Darling-Kuria has cared for Holly Johnson for 7 years. Holly's parents, Bill and Pauline Johnson, wrote to Scholastic recommending Ms. Darling-Kuria for the award.

"Miss Nikki has given Holly a safe, fun and educational experience, which we sincerely believe has contributed to her excellence in school and her growth as an individual," the Johnsons wrote. They added, "Through Nikki, Holly has experienced swimming lessons, camping, visits to the library and field trips to various parks and museums. Nikki has played the role of social director, tutor, nurse and guidance counselor for Holly."

Ms. Darling-Kuria is a licensed family child care provider who cares for children before and after school from her Spring Ridge home.

"We do a lot of educational activities," Ms. Darling-Kuria said. "I try to keep a learning-enriched environment so they are self-motivated to do the activities."

She currently has five children in her program, including Kevin Varndell. The 10-year-old boy has been with "Miss Nikki" since he was a year old. Jack Sherman-Sleppy is the newest member of her group. He has been with Ms. Darling-Kuria for six weeks.

"I got into this the way many people get into this," Ms. Darling-Kuria said. "I was working down the road in Bethesda. I tried to find a job in Frederick but couldn't. Then I realized if I was paying someone to care for

my daughter, then I should be able to care for other people's children."

She founded Creative Kids Development Family Child Care in 1996 and became the first nationally accredited family child care provider in the state of Maryland.

"I just really hope that the work I've done has given a lot of people the opportunities to do family child care," Ms. Darling-Kuria said.

She has also secured grant funding to provide mentoring and technical assistance to eight other Maryland family child care providers. She serves as a trainer for the Office of Child Care in the Maryland State Department of Education and the public relations chair for the National Association for Family Child Care.

"We're not just a less-expensive form of child care for parents," Ms. Darling-Kuria said. "We help get children ready for school and to be successful."

She is proud to point out that all of the children she works with are above grade level in reading and math abilities.

Even years later, the effect of a good child care provider can be felt. Ms. Darling-Kuria first came to Maryland as a nanny, caring for the two sons of Toby Tucker Hecht. They are now college graduates who still love learning, according to their mother.

Ms. Hecht wrote a letter to Scholastic recommending Ms. Darling-Kuria for the award.

"She has been a wonderful influence, and our family considers itself blessed that she came into our lives," Ms. Hecht wrote.

Ms. Darling-Kuria will be recognized along with the four other winners of the award at a ceremony on Dec. 8 at the National Association for Education of Young Children Conference in Washington, D.C.

"Scholastic is one of the most prestigious organizations in our field to receive an award from," Ms. Darling-Kuria said.

She also noted it is rare for a home child care provider to receive the award. Most recipients are usually Head Start, pre-school or kindergarten teachers.

The winners were selected by early childhood experts and advisers from Scholastic based on their overall commitment to advocacy, developmentally appropriate curriculum, cultural sensitivity, leadership, community outreach and their ability to mobilize resources.