

# TAKING A LEAP OF *faith*

**Pam Simon, Fidgets2Widgets**

EDITED BY AMY L CHARLES



Sydney  
Ashland



Pam  
Simon

“Fidgets2Widgets is a welcoming environment where everyone is comfortable. Kids who self-identify as geeks or nerds, social kids, kids who may struggle with Asperger’s or mild autism, kids who are gifted—they all get along and form relationships. No cliques. No bullying. They are all Widgetarians!”

Pam Simon has a B.S. in Speech Pathology and Audiology from the University of Iowa and an MSW in Social Work from Gallaudet University. Yet the Fidgets2Widgets concept came primarily from a collaborative relationship with co-founder Sydney Ashland. Their real education was in raising their children. “We saw a big disconnect between school life during the day and digital/virtual life at night on computers, tablets, phones, and gaming consoles,” said Simon.

Digital/virtual life was social, relevant, current, and engaging in a way school wasn’t. Social media, gaming, and texting became the modern-day playground. Technology is the language children speak; the way in. Although children in general think they know everything technologically, Simon and Ashland saw the need for close supervision and guidance regarding safety, discernment, balance, and skills—tools not taught with great prevalence in schools. And afterschool enrichment options become very limited closer to middle school. Children were no longer satisfied with afterschool care that felt more like “babysitting.”

Rather than continuing to complain about what didn’t exist, Simon and Ashland took a huge leap of faith and built a concept, program, and casual learning environment centered on what they’d observed. They leased physical space, ordered furniture

and devices, and began creating the curriculum to support their tag line: “Holistic, High Energy, High Tech.” They wanted a casual learning environment where fully engaged children experience technology through the “active creator” (not “passive user”) lens. They constantly survey the children to see what they are interested in learning. One example was integrating Minecraft and other educational gaming platforms into their learning modules.

As a social worker, Simon’s basic tenet is, “meet the client where he/she is.” She and Ashland know that to reach their digital natives, they must meet them at technology—their love and way of life. “As long as we are in charge, supervising, structuring, and mentoring, we know they are using technology in appropriate ways.” Fidgets2Widgets has a structure children relate to and use as a container of exploration. Children are mastering basic STEM skills, and because the environment is relaxed and holistic, they move freely from exercise bike to balance board to Legos to Wii to computers. “When it’s time to meet as a group and tackle the learning module for the day, there is exuberance, joy, and great social interaction.”

Simon and Ashland relate to the children as female role models and mentors, with that nurturing “mom” energy thrown in for good measure. “We are middle-age women who love technology ourselves,” said Simon. She and Ashland are committed to remaining on the cutting edge and helping children experience technology. “We find ourselves staying one step ahead of the kids. It can be daunting at times, but as lifelong nerds ourselves, we enjoy it!” •

Have a “True Story” you want to share? E-mail it to [editorial@serendipity-media.com](mailto:editorial@serendipity-media.com).