



## 5TH ANNUAL FIREFIGHTERS OF NORTHEAST WISCONSIN

Our 2015 initiative aims to help a former teacher turned entrepreneur through a successful business start up

Story by Sean Fitzgerald,  
New North B2B publisher



### The entrepreneur

### The consultant

*Teaching is among the most noble of professions, a sentiment immortalized by President Coolidge during his July 4th address 91 years ago. Despite its nobility, neither the training for most teachers nor the experience of instructing others in the classroom prepares a teacher to read profit and loss statements or balance sheets, develop a marketing plan, or comply with human resource and payroll regulations. The skills associated with starting up and operating a successful business might have little to do with shaping young minds to help lead tomorrow's economy.*

But that doesn't concern Neenah resident Kelly Steinke, an entrepreneurial teacher with 15 years in the classroom under her belt. Steinke decided to leave a secure, fulltime position as a special education teacher in the Neenah School District this past October in order to pursue another passion of taking her business, READ Learning Educational Services LLC, from a part time avocation during evenings to a full-fledged enterprise.

Seeking guidance as she starts ramping up her business, Steinke agreed to share her journey through *New North*

B2B's 5th annual Firefighters of Northeast Wisconsin initiative, where each year we pair business owners seeking professional guidance with some of the region's leading business consultants for an intensive course of work at no cost. In return, participating business owners share with B2B the lessons they learn while working with their consultant, and how they plan to implement those lessons into their operations. It's our goal that readers facing similar issues within their own businesses learn from the Firefighters program and make improvements to their own businesses.

For this year's Firefighters program, B2B paired Steinke together with veteran business consultant Gary Vaughan, the owner of Appleton-based Guident Business Solutions and a staple of our Firefighters program for the past five years. Steinke will work with Vaughan and his Guident team on a weekly basis during the next five months to help launch her business, with monthly updates on the progress of their work provided in the next few editions of B2B magazine. A capstone article profiling the transformation of Steinke's business will appear in our March 2016 edition.

### Why Firefighters?

When B2B launched the inaugural Firefighters of Northeast Wisconsin program in 2011, we targeted those business owners from northeast Wisconsin who felt as if they were constantly putting out fires within their businesses, spinning their wheels and unable to move forward with any meaningful growth of sales and profit. In that inaugural year, the Firefighters program helped one struggling business improve its financial practices and center attention on its core competencies, while helping another business with two partners to amicably separate into two distinct operations.

Since that time, a total of four business consultants from the New North region – each with their own distinct approach to helping businesses flourish – have assisted eight northeast Wisconsin companies to reach a point at which they were better off than before they began the Firefighters program. Some of those participating business owners were in danger of losing their companies, while others needed assistance moving from the start up phase into a second-stage firm. In this case, for the first time, the initiative will be assisting a new entrepreneur to get her business off the ground.

So it might appear that there's not necessarily fires that need to be put out with a start-up entity, and that the term "firefighters" may not be as fitting for our 2015 campaign this year. Vaughan argues that a firefighter elicits a sense of

security that any immediate threat will be extinguished. As in his own consulting practice, Vaughan helps bring business owners to a safer place, much like a firefighter.

Guident Business Solutions works with its regular portfolio of small business clients across northeast Wisconsin to improve their financial outlook by building owner equity in the company. In doing so, Vaughan helps his clients ensure they use accurate and up-to-date financial information so that their financial reports don't lead them astray.

"Everything in a business ultimately boils down to a financial decision," Vaughan said. "That's how we perceive it."

**NAME:** Kelly Steinke  
**COMPANY:** READ Learning Educational Services LLC  
**LOCATION:** Neenah  
**FOUNDED:** Began working with clients in evenings and weekends in 2011; made it a fulltime business in October 2015.  
**WEB:** [www.readlearnservices.com](http://www.readlearnservices.com)



### Teacher turned entrepreneur

Like a number of other entrepreneurs, Steinke dabbled in business on the side while working a fulltime job as a special education teacher in the Neenah School District. That side business – working one on one with dyslexic children to substantially upgrade their reading level – had come to take much of her free time while not allowing her to help all of the families who've reached out to her.

Meanwhile, the ever-growing and diverse responsibilities of a special education teacher didn't enable much focus on helping students strictly with reading disabilities, specifically, those students with dyslexia who are far behind their peers. It's a niche area of education Steinke dove into a decade ago when she learned both of her twin daughters suffered from dyslexia. Providing them both with some early intervention, both girls – now 11 years old – read at a level above the average for their grade.

"I honestly think I specialized myself out of a job," noted Steinke, indicating her specialization in teaching dyslexic students to improve their reading skills is beyond the scope of which most school districts can devote a fulltime position. "I could really make a big difference in a lot of people's lives."

So after 15 years as a teacher, Steinke took the leap into fulltime entrepreneurship last month with the support of her husband, Mike, a mechanical engineer who works as a technical sales representative. His job supports the family's health insurance benefits and sufficient household income to allow Kelly to work with the five students she's currently teaching. She acknowledges her husband's support has provided instrumental momentum toward her efforts.

"He always encourages me to go the extra mile - especially when it's not something in my comfort zone. I can honestly

### Gary Vaughan

Guident Business Solutions, Appleton  
[www.guidentbusinesssolutions.com](http://www.guidentbusinesssolutions.com)



Vaughan launched Guident in 2009 after spending his entire career teaching – both in the classroom and in business. Having previously spent many years as a business owner himself, Vaughan realized many business owners lacked fundamental skills such as understanding financials, human resource practices and management skills, as examples. His firm's proprietary Guident 360 Assessment Program enables business owners to holistically address their business needs.

Vaughan has professional experience in a variety of industries, including retail, petroleum, manufacturing and academics. He is a senior adjunct instructor for Concordia University of Wisconsin and a lecturer in economics and entrepreneurship at Lawrence University in Appleton.

say that I wouldn't have had the courage to do this without him," Steinke said.

She currently has capacity to include another four or five students in her own schedule, she said, beyond her other efforts to launch READ Learning Services.

**Building a business around learning to read**

Commonly accepted research on dyslexia indicates one in five people worldwide have some degree of the reading disability. As such, dyslexia affects early efforts to learn to read, and as a result, leaves many dyslexic children behind in the classroom uninterested in school because nearly every subject requires some measure of reading in order to understand the material, Steinke said.

Utilizing well-established methods for teaching dyslexic children to read, Steinke offers early intervention services which help young students quickly catch up with their peers through a multisensory learning process. And while Steinke can only work on a one-on-one basis with a limited number of students at a time, she has been refining her proven teaching methods into a learning kit that can be sold online to teach any student to learn to read.

"What I'm really looking for is a sustainable business model. This kit is her competitive advantage," said Vaughan, who plans to work with Steinke to build a web site, develop a retail pricing model around her product, and develop a marketing

*"Kelly was probably an intrapreneur before in an environment that didn't support it."*

Gary Vaughan

plan to promote the reading kit to teachers statewide and then nationally.

Beyond the one-on-one teaching and the kit she's developing, READ Learning Services also offers dyslexia screening and consultative planning for families and schools. Steinke has already earned a stellar reputation in Wisconsin as a dyslexia educator, serving on the board of the state chapter for International Dyslexia Association. She plans to parlay others' awareness of her capabilities into speaking engagements and professional training opportunities, both generating additional revenue segments for her business. Vaughan feels this former teacher shows quite a bit of promise as an entrepreneur.

"Kelly was probably an intrapreneur before in an environment that didn't support it," Vaughan noted.

To provide Steinke's business with a concrete footing, Vaughan has encouraged her to set up a limited liability

company and take out a standard property and casualty insurance policy on the business. She acquired a bookkeeping software and is learning the basics of financial management in order to keep her own books in order. Vaughan even gave this reading teacher a reading assignment of her own – the book *Financial Intelligence for Entrepreneurs* by Karen Berman and Joe Knight, a standard read Vaughan shares with all of his clients. The lessons from the book elevate an entrepreneurial layperson's vocabulary around topics of financial management and explain why they need to know what the numbers on their financial statements really say about the performance of the business.

Ultimately, Vaughan said there will be a bit of a learning curve for Steinke to think and act like a business owner. Even though she's dabbled in business on the side for the past four years, she managed all of her expenses personally, and treated the part-time teaching and consulting work as an extension of herself, family and household. That's changing.

"She has to start thinking about it as a business, particularly because she's coming from academia," said Vaughan, an entrepreneur who now also serves as a university-level finance and entrepreneurship teacher himself.

B2B plans to catch up with both Steinke and Vaughan in our December 2015 edition to chart the progress of their work together and prepare READ Learning Services to make a splash in 2016. ■

*"I honestly think I specialized myself out of a job."*

Kelly Steinke

**Methodology**

*New North B2B* magazine began seeking entries for its 5th annual Firefighters of Northeast Wisconsin initiative earlier this year, with a goal of assisting those northeast Wisconsin small business owners who feel as if they're constantly burning the candle at both ends, putting out fires, spinning their wheels, but intent on finding a way to improve.

We put out a call for nominations this spring, and in the end agreed to help Neenah-based READ Learning Services LLC with its start up.

Through the generous help of Gary Vaughan of Guident Business Solutions in Appleton, READ Learning Services owner Kelly Steinke will receive five month's worth of consulting at no cost to help her work on the strategy of launching and growing her business.

B2B is providing a monthly update on the progress of Steinke's efforts in each issue leading up to a capstone article in the March 2016 issue of *New North B2B* magazine.



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