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Off the Beat

Sophie Felts is raising funds to support MoCo 'learning hubs,' a pandemic necessity

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Sophie Felts, a member of the Ruppert landscaping family, is leading a public-private effort to raise funds for "learning hubs" in Montgomery County — Ruppert Cos. and the Ruppert Family Foundation contributed \$150,000 to the effort. She is the owner of [Sophie Felts Floral Design](#), and a mother of four.

What is a learning hub? Learning hubs evolved in response to the Covid-19 pandemic. When public schools moved to a virtual only model, many parents who needed to return to work were left without the "childcare" component of school. Learning hubs are essentially a place where students can do their virtual classwork with supervision and guidance from dedicated staff. My energetic and innovative friend, [Rory Richardson](#) and her team at Bar-T Ranch (one of the largest before and after school childcare providers in Montgomery County) had an idea to solve this problem. Rory, her team, and a few others came together to create a consortium of childcare providers in the area.



JODI & KURT PHOTOGRAPHY

Sophie Felts is raising funds to support Montgomery County learning hubs.

They worked closely with the Greater Washington Community Foundation, school system, and County government to develop a program where parents can have a safe place for their children to distance learn while they work. Strict safety precautions such as temperature checks, masks, physical distancing, frequent sanitizing and limiting pods to 13 students or less — with each classroom having dedicated entrance/exits, helped to make this model scalable with less of a chance of spreading the virus. I have been working closely with the Children’s Opportunity Fund of the Greater Washington Community Foundation to raise money for learning hub scholarships to support low-income students or students in need.

How are you using the funds raised? So far we have raised over \$500,000 privately and thanks to the hard work of [Kimberly Rusnak](#) and team at The Community Foundation. Additionally, the Montgomery County Council just approved \$7 million to increase support this fall. Thus far, the Children’s Opportunity Fund has been able to start nine learning hubs at elementary schools in the county. There are about 250 (K-5) children enrolled, and we are looking to open more sites in the coming weeks.

Can, or should, learning hubs become a public school replacement post-pandemic? No, of course not. As a country, I think we need to remain focused on providing access to high quality, free education for every child. Learning hubs offer a short-term solution to a very specific crisis.

Do you know any mothers, or fathers, who have left the workforce to take care of their kids? I’ve had this question asked of me in the past and to me the answer really lies more in our collective ability to experience empathy for others. Disparity exists at many levels within our country, which can create less commonality and shared experience between groups. I don’t believe you need to personally know someone or something firsthand to connect on a human level and be able to put yourself in someone else’s shoes and want to help.

As a mother of four, how are you handling education during the pandemic? We have a group of nine cousins, ranging in age from 5 to 12, who meet at my house from 8:30 a.m. to 4 p.m. each day and we’ve converted my living room into a classroom with nine desks. The moms are taking turns staying home with the group and we have hired a high schooler to help. She is especially wonderful with the technology part and we’ve found that sometimes the kids seem

to listen to her much more than their own parents. Even in this scenario, all the moms in the group have had to significantly cut back at work. We have precautions in place to keep everyone as healthy as possible. In the end, we just try to remain focused on the fact that it's not about tests or grades. What matters most of all is that our children (and really all humans) feel loved, safe and supported during this challenging time.

What's the most elaborate floral arrangement you've created? We hung 2,000 tulips from the ceiling at the Fairmont Hotel, creating a unique floral canopy over the room below. I love how it turned out.

What's your favorite flower? It changes from season to season. Right now, locally grown dahlias have my heart. They add a dash of color as we head into the fall.

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