

Lincoln LaGrotteria replaces Christl Brunkhorst as director of Jin-A Child Care NJ

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[Jin-A Child Care Center](#) in New Jersey, a beloved interfaith preschool of more than three decades, reopened its doors on Monday, June 15 under new leadership after its 2020 graduation ceremony. Founded in 1987 through an interfaith vision and the fundraising efforts of Unificationist Mamiko Rattley, the school temporarily closed in March amid the global COVID-19 pandemic. Now, under social distancing and sanitizing guidelines, Jin-A is welcoming a fresh group of children along with a new director, Lincoln LaGrotteria, as Jin-A's longtime president and director Christl Brunkhorst retires after 32 years.



"Jin-A has brought so much love and joy to so many children over the years," said Brunkhorst in a heartfelt speech among faculty after the school's outdoor graduation ceremony on Friday, June 12. "It's an amazing transition time now where everything is new, and it's a big responsibility that Lincoln is taking

on, but we really feel God brought him here for leadership at this time."

More than 25 children and their families were separately honored during Jin-A's 32nd commencement, with LaGrotteria officially appointed to his new position afterward. As a stay-at-home father and former adjunct professor, LaGrotteria seemed primed to fill the role that Brunkhorst was vacating. "It's not very common for a guy to be a caretaker at home," said LaGrotteria as he accepted a special plaque from when Jin-A was founded. "My family moved around a lot when I was little. I had a different house and school all throughout my elementary years and I didn't want that for my own children."

LaGrotteria said although his family has faced recent hardships, he felt divinely inspired when Brunkhorst contacted him about the position at Jin-A. "There are moments in life where you can feel that it's not about relationships, money, or ambition, but that it's about God's will and where you feel you should be," said LaGrotteria. With his wife's encouragement and support, he happily accepted the role.

A Beautiful History

Nestled on a tree-lined hilltop in suburban Clifton, Jin-A Child Care Center has been a safe haven of learning for preschool children since its opening in January 1988. "There have been so many experiences where God was always guiding us," said Brunkhorst, who was appointed Jin-A's director shortly after teaching there for a few years. "I was teaching in every classroom, and when I took over the school we had about 30 children. I have seen such amazing growth during my time here."

Jin-A, derived from Chinese characters meaning "advance, move forward the child," soon developed an esteemed reputation among the wider community as well as its students' families. "Jin-A has a strong reputation as a great child care center and one that has drawn so many families all throughout the area," said Robert Beebe, principal at the nearby New Hope School. "Christl has been an incredible blessing to the center."

"It feels like a real family around here," said one parent, whose daughter accepted her gift bag and graduation certificate from Brunkhorst during the commencement. "She was always so happy to come to school."



A Heartfelt Farewell

Deeply admired by her colleagues, Brunkhorst leaves behind a leadership legacy of love, courage, and dedication. A native of Austria, she grew up with a strong work ethic contributing to her family's farm and quickly recognized her passion for teaching at an early age. "I remember as a child entering first grade in primary school, I was very happy and excited," said Brunkhorst. "I was very lucky to have a young and energetic teacher who inspired me at such a young age to become a teacher."

Brunkhorst taught in her homeland for several years before coming to the U.S. to join her husband in 1982. With her love of learning, she furthered her education and earned a Master's Degree from the Unification Theological Seminary (UTS). "I remained steadfast in all my knowledge and my faith, even

when my future was widely unknown," said Brunkhorst.

Over the course of 12 years, Brunkhorst enrolled her four children at Jin-A. Today, she and her eldest son remain part of its school board. "My children grew up here and they have the fondest memories of Jin-A," said Brunkhorst. "It's a beautiful synergy of everybody working together so wonderfully and I really have to say I was so blessed to be working here."

A Bright Future

Excited for what's ahead, LaGrotteria feels equipped for any challenges that may arise as the pandemic subsides. "My wife really encouraged me with this opportunity at Jin-A; to not only be an example here, but to be an example that we can take care of things and build a great team of people while creating something very beautiful that is not about me, but rather is about all of us together," said LaGrotteria.

It's been a sharp learning curve, but Brunkhorst is confident in LaGrotteria's ability. "It's a complicated project he is taking over, but Lincoln has been here throughout the whole pandemic helping us," said Brunkhorst. "He was very instrumental in figuring out the whole process of our transition, including a new teaching program and outside play time for the children. He has also been beautifying and cleaning up the property while working so hard and it has really moved my heart."

LaGrotteria said he is focused on further building upon Brunkhorst's strong foundation at Jin-A with the help of seasoned faculty. "The responsibility of a leader is not necessarily at the front, but at the back serving and taking care of others so we can build a school of love," said LaGrotteria.



School of Love

Among several changes, a new colorful rock garden featuring words of kindness now greets visitors at the entrance of Jin-A. A freshly painted rock labyrinth is also part of a peaceful nature retreat toward the back end of the four-acre property. "I am so moved at how intimately God has taken care of this place," said Brunkhorst, recalling virtually no damage when Hurricane Sandy pummeled the Northeast in 2012. "God has always provided school children, teachers, and help for any kind of work that we ever needed done." With social distancing and sanitizing measures in place, the Jin-A staff eagerly awaits the summer students. "I know Lincoln is a part of our many blessings," said Brunkhorst. "The atmosphere is beautiful here because we truly love and care for all of the children who come to Jin-A."

Brunkhorst will continue to guide LaGrotteria in the coming months while serving on the Jin-A school board.