



Aleena Zaidi and Bilal Zaidi

Families Helping Families

Brother-and-sister duo Aleena and Bilal Zaidi dive into what a typical day looks like at their Angus Valley Montessori School franchise

BY GEORGIE BINKS

Opening a preschool franchise location during a pandemic means you need to be flexible. You may have just figured out your typical day when everything changes and your schedule, procedures, and more get turned upside down.

That's what Aleena and Bilal Zaidi, a brother and sister franchising team, discovered when they opened their Angus Valley Montessori School location in September 2021.

The two, originally born in Canada, were raised in Pakistan and then returned to Canada for university. They say they work well together—as Aleena explains, “We depend on each other. If you have a sibling, you have to be there for them.”

The first challenges the two faced were delays in opening their Vaughan, Ontario location. The pair originally hoped to open in 2020, and then in summer 2021, Bilal says. “There were a lot of delays, labour shortages, and restrictions by York Region on how many people you could have in the building, [as little as] one tradesman at a time. We anticipated we would be open for summer camp, but that was pushed back.”

A DAY IN THE LIFE



By September 2021, the school was ready to open its doors. “Because it was a new school, teachers had their hands full and we really couldn’t have parents coming inside, so we had our grand opening [take place] in October,” Bilal explains. The grand opening was a highlight for the new business owner. “We set up a tent and parents met all the teachers. That put a face to the names.”

Establishing the day-to-day operations

Once they opened, the Zaidis needed to be ready for a different kind of experience. “The first month was intense,” Aleena says. “It was all hands on deck; everyone was

here at 7 a.m. because it was so new. Now we’ve worked out what’s best for each person between me, Bilal, and our supervisor.”

Aleena comes into work at about 8 to 8:30 a.m., while Bilal arrives between 8:30 to 9:00 a.m. Bilal handles the back-office responsibilities and Aleena manages the day-to-day parent-based operations. “We also have our supervisor. She and I are up front, meeting with parents, doing pick up and drop off and working on day-to-day tasks,” says Aleena. “My day ends at about 5:30 p.m., but we still have a lot of tours [with interested parents], and we can’t do the tours when school is running, so I schedule them for after hours.”

One huge change brought by the pandemic is that following COVID-19 restrictions, parents haven’t been permitted in the building. “Typically when you drop off a child at a new place, parents would be allowed to come in, observe, and stay in the classroom for an hour. That’s not something we can do right now,” explains Aleena.

That’s actually been a positive, though. She adds, “It’s really shortened the transition time for children to settle in. Before, I think it was harder for parents to leave their children for the first time more than [it was for] the children.”

Still, Aleena says it’s vital to keep in touch and update parents about their kids. “We stay connected with them throughout the day through our apps.”

Seeing how quickly the children settled into their new environment was a high point for Aleena. “I expected the fears and not wanting to come in to last much longer, but that ended very quickly. That’s definitely the highlight of my day: children enjoying the space [we created].”

Keeping children in good (and clean) hands

When it comes to COVID-19 protocols, Aleena says teachers must wear masks, but it’s up to parents whether their children do. The children wash their hands a lot. “Because they’re kids, they touch everything, so there’s a lot of handwashing going on before each activity and each transition between activities.”

“Since it was a new school, we took COVID-19 into account,” Bilal says. “We converted faucets to be touchless, as well as soap and paper towel dispensers. Angus Valley partners with Eco Lab”—a provider of medical-grade cleaning and hygiene solutions—“who provides hospital-grade hand sanitizer. It has the quickest kill time for the COVID-19 virus and is child-friendly as well. As protocol changes, our policy gets updated.”

The franchise caters to children aged six months to six years, and uses a customized curriculum designed for each age group within the school. Programs are based on the method developed by Dr. Maria Montessori—who pioneered the use of exploration and child-led activities in teaching—and incorporate art, music, move-

Left to right: Murtaza Hasan, AVMS Founding Partner, Bilal Zaidi, Aleena Zaidi, Sunil Bhardwaj, AVMS Founding Partner, Syeda Hasnain AVMS Director of Education, and Saneh Bhardwaj, AVMS Operations.



ment, drama, and play. The first location was opened in Markham, Ontario by Murtaza and Syeda Hasan in 2013, under the name Angus Glen Montessori. Today, the franchise operates as Angus Valley Montessori, and has locations operating in Pickering, Milton, and Vaughan, and one under construction in mid-town Toronto. The brand has another five locations at various planning stages all in southwestern Ontario and hopes to expand to western Canada and the U.S.

The brother-sister duo speak very highly of the Angus Valley Montessori franchise. “You benefit from the experience of being with an establishment that’s been around for [years]. I think there’s been a lot of thought put into the curriculum and the design of the school. They have the experience—all the details have been thought through.”

Aleena adds, “When we started, there was a lot to think of because there are young children in your care. There are all these policies, and everything needs to be in place. It’s a lot for someone to take on. I think being part of a franchise is great because it’s laid out for you.”

She also values her interaction with other franchisees. “It’s not your typical cookie-cutter franchise. When you go to the other locations, they have the same feel in terms of design and aesthetics, but as owners, you get to inject your personality. Most of the franchisees know each other. It’s nice to interact with other franchisees who are going through exactly what we’re going through.”

Aleena had already worked for the franchise for two and a half years, running their art camps, before working in administration, as well as in all the classrooms, to get a feel for how the franchise operated. During this time, she also qualified as an ECE (Early Childhood Educator).

“Having some experience in business and education definitely helps to implement your vision,” says Aleena. “Being a franchisee, things were laid out for us, but we also hired a supervisor who has an educational background. Our supervisor has been in the education business for 20 years.”

AVMS founder Hasan says the Zaidis are wonderful franchisees. “Aleena and Bilal belong to a family of successful entrepreneurs and have seen firsthand how an independent business operates and thrives. As children, they attended a Montessori pre-school before entering a private school setting and recognize the importance this experience had in preparing them for primary school, as well as teaching them lifelong skills. The fact that education and learning were emphasized at home make them excellent ambassadors for providing new generations of children an equally positive early learning experience.”

Aleena concludes, “I love working with children and it’s been nice connecting with families. Our primary goal was to provide reliable care for parents. There are so many families going back to work. I can’t even imagine how tough that must be if I had just dropped off my children for eight hours at a place that I had no idea about. So, our goal has been to make families feel like their child is in good hands.” 🍁



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