



Baby Steps

Inspired by a negative experience, Valerie Franco launched Baby Gear-USA — a company that specializes in the rental of premium-quality baby equipment.

VALERIE FRANCO

BY ALLISON HERSH
PHOTOGRAPHY BY SARAH CHURCHILL

WHEN VALERIE FRANCO visited her sister in Arizona in 1994, she rented a high chair to feed her infant son, Kevin.

“The high chair was sticky and dirty, and we ended up not even using it,” she recalled. “I realized that I could do much better than what I had experienced.”

Inspired by that bad experience, this ambitious entrepreneur launched Baby Gear-USA — a company specializing in rental, delivery and setup of premium-quality baby equipment — from the bonus room of her home at The Landings in April 2003.

Today, she leases cribs, strollers, car seats, high chairs and other items to a growing list of individual and corporate customers. She also provides car seats to Enterprise Car Rental locations in Savannah.

“We’re constantly updating our inventory,” she said. “We want people to know that they’re getting a high-quality product.”

All of the company’s baby items are purchased new from the manufacturer and are hand-cleaned and sanitized after each use. Gently used items are donated to local charitable organizations.

“Clients have been impressed with how clean things are,” said Franco, who serves as the company’s president and CEO. “We have quite a few repeat customers. Every year gets busier and busier.”

In addition to her uncompromising commitment to quality, Franco emphasizes safety above all else. She constantly checks recall lists for car seats, cribs and other baby items and has been certified by the National Highway Traffic Safety Administration for Child Passenger Safety. Because she requests the age, weight and height of every baby in advance, car seats delivered by Baby Gear-USA are individually adjusted for each child to offer optimal protection.

Born in Indiana, this high-energy entrepreneur grew up in Connecticut before moving to Savannah with her husband, Claude, in 1998. Today, the couple has three boys ranging in age from 7 to 13 who have busy schedules and plenty of after-school activities.

“I have a lot of flexibility with my schedule,” said Franco, a former dental hygienist. “I’m able to make the deliveries when my kids are in school, so it has really worked out great.”

Franco launched a second Baby Gear-USA location on Cape Cod, Mass., in July 2005 and plans to expand her company’s prototype into two additional cities in the Southeast later this year.

“I’m trying to brand the name, like Starbucks or the Ritz-Carlton,” she explained. “I want people to know they’re getting meticulously clean, first-quality equipment.”

The best part of her job, she said, is dealing with clients and seeing the smiles on their faces when she delivers a hard-to-find twin stroller or sets up a crib at a vacation rental on Tybee Island.

“I really enjoy what I’m doing,” she said, her brown eyes sparkling. “And I know I can keep making it even better.” ■