

April Opening Planned for The Children's Place

Basement of Auditorium To Meet Day-Care Need

By LESLIE BROWN
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A miniature town square with monkey bars and a rock garden will sit in the middle. A little red schoolhouse, a library topped by a watch tower and homes with pitched roofs will surround it.

To the east, the Green Mountains will rise into view; to the west, Lake Champlain and the Adirondacks will form the horizon. Everywhere will be children — playing, drawing, learning, laughing.

No, this isn't a 4-year-old's version of the Garden of Eden. It is Burlington Youth Director Jane Driscoll's vision for the basement of Memorial Auditorium.

After two years of planning, battles with committees, financial uncertainty and snags of various sorts, Driscoll's dream of an innovative day-care center looks like it is coming to fruition. A director has been hired. A board has been appointed. Architectural blueprints have been completed. Construction work is about to begin.

The Burlington Children's Place, a day-care center with a sliding-fee scale launched last spring with a Community Development Block Grant, will be open by mid-April, Driscoll promises.

But some day-care professionals, many of whom applaud Driscoll's plan, still wonder if the center will fly.

"They don't have much money, and it takes a lot of money to launch a day-care center. I think it's very unrealistic," said Maureen Danielczyk, director of the day-care center at Trinity College. "I'm worried. I certainly think it's needed."

"I think its intent is very noble and necessary. My hope is that there will be enough community support. I think that's going to be a

real tricky area," said Kate Nelligan, director of the day-care center run by the Visiting Nurse Association. "I know their goal is to pay adequate salaries and also keep their rates low, and sometimes that's mutually exclusive."

Driscoll bristles at the thought of anyone's doubt. "There's no reason this won't make it. There's absolutely no reason this won't make it," she said emphatically. "This is not a pie-in-the-sky dream."

The Burlington Children's Place is being built to hold 59 children, from infants to preschoolers, in half of Memorial Auditorium's basement. A \$60,000 federal block grant is transforming the stark basement into "a minicommunity for little people," Driscoll said.

The day-care center will look like a small village, with colorful, old-fashioned facades made of sheetrock, playground equipment and murals on the walls. Children will be assigned to one of four rooms, where they will mix with other children of various ages before going off to the village square, library, art room or playground, Driscoll said.

"I want children to realize they have to cohabit with people of different ages, with different needs and habits," Driscoll said. "There will be a family feeling rather than an institutional feeling. I want it to seem like a community."

A playground will be built along the grassy stretch between Main Street and the auditorium. Because employees will take the children on field trips to City Hall Park, stores, the courthouse or the waterfront, the center has been granted an exemption from a licensing code that requires 75 feet of playground



Free Press Photo by ELAINE ISAACSON

Jane Driscoll shows model of layout for basement of Memorial Auditorium.

space per child, Driscoll said.

"We intend to use the community as a resource. It'll be like having the whole city as their playground," she said.

Driscoll, who said the day-care center "will challenge a lot of assumptions," hopes the children will learn to welcome and enjoy education.

"People tend to compartmentalize their lives too much. I think it's

ingrained in our society that there's fun and there's learning and that they're separate," she said. "What we want to do is promote learning as a way of life, and a great way of life."

At least half of the children at the Children's Place must be from low- and moderate-income families, to meet the guidelines of the federal grant. The center's sliding fee scale, the only such flexible rate in

the city, will range from \$40 to \$50 weekly. Fixed fees will go from \$60 to \$75, depending on the child's age, Driscoll said. Most day-care centers range in cost from \$50 to \$60 a week.

The idea of a day-care center in the basement of Memorial Auditorium surfaced two years ago, after rapidly rising rents forced the Ethan Allen Day Care Center to look for a new home. Directors of

Ethan Allen suggested the Board of Aldermen turn the basement of the city-owned auditorium into a community center, with a corner dedicated to day care.

But Bernard Sanders had just been elected mayor, and his coalition on the board was fragile, said Ken Sachs, former director of Ethan Allen and a board member of the Children's Place.

"The political winds at the time weren't right," he said. Ethan Allen, which had a sliding-fee scale and cared for many low-income children, closed in September 1982.

Driscoll, however, continued to entertain the idea of a basement day-care center. As the voluntary director of the mayor's youth office, she said, she began to become aware of the need for improved child care. She also began to realize that day-care providers were terribly underpaid.

Driscoll and Gale Wheeler, plus Kathy Hibbert and Joanne Clavelle, who were helping to reorganize the mayor's women's council, began outlining a plan for the center. In November 1982, Driscoll presented their plans to the committee that would recommend how that year's community block grants be allocated. Some of her presentations led to stormy meetings, she said.

"We had to put all our energy just into the battle over it," Driscoll said. "There were a couple especially vicious meetings."

Committee members questioned how a day-care center would limit the uses of the auditorium, whether the city should help fund such an undertaking and, on two occasions, whether the Sanders administration supported the project merely because Sanders and Driscoll were such close friends, said Martin Fitzpatrick, one of the committee members.

The committee did not endorse the project, but Sanders, and eventually the Board of Aldermen, did.

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Day-Care Opening Coming Soon

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Last March, after several more heated battles, the \$60,000 grant to construct and launch the center was awarded.

Aldermen agreed to one other crucial request. They would rent the 3,200-foot space to the center's directors for \$500 a month the first year, and \$800 a month after that. Everyone agrees the rent reflects a sizable price break.

"The city is giving us a very good break in the rent," Driscoll said. "The city is playing an important role here, a very important role."

Driscoll has appointed a board of directors that includes Nick Wiley, leasing agent for Burlington Square Mall; Rick Whittlesey, assistant city attorney; and Fran Toomey, a member of the Council on Children and Families of Chittenden County.

Susan Kuntz, a former evaluation specialist for the Vermont Education Department, was hired as director two weeks ago. She will be paid \$15,000 a year, placing her at the top end of the pay scale for day-care directors, Driscoll said.

All of the \$60,000 grant, however, is being sunk into construction, and at this point the board has no start-up funds for the day care. Kuntz is working part time through the mayor's youth office as she attempts to raise the \$5,000 the board estimates it needs to open the center.

Aside from the block grant, low-rent and in-kind services the city is offering, Burlington is not subsidizing the day-care center and never will, Sanders said. "At this point, our commitment to the center has been fulfilled," he said.

Driscoll said the center will generate enough revenue through fund-raisers, private grants and tuition fees to finance its operation. Should the Children's Place start to falter, the city will be under no obligation to bail it out, she said. But such a question, she added emphatically, is moot.

"The center is not going to fail. There's just no way it will fail," she said. "There is a possibility that all our dreams won't come true. But there's no possibility that it will fail."

Day-care centers, some professionals have said,

traditionally teeter on the financial brink. "The overhead is tremendous," said Donna Little, owner of ABC Day Care Center, the state's largest. It is a labor-intensive business with numerous licensing regulations that must be met, she said.

Infant day care, which many centers do not provide, costs even more because the state requires one day-care provider for every three infants. As the children grow older, the ratio widens.

The day-care center at the Visiting Nurse Association is one of the few Burlington centers that accepts infants. In order to cover that expense, it charges \$75 to \$85 per child weekly, one of the highest rates in town, Nelligan said.

"We're in a position where we're faced with charging the higher end of the scale in cost, and faced with paying care-givers a pretty low wage," Nelligan said.

"That's another reason I'm worried about the Memorial Auditorium day-care, because they're going to have infants," added Danielczyk of the Trinity College day-care center. The center there has been able to maintain lower rates because it does not provide infant care and because it receives a subsidy from the college, she said.

"If we didn't have that subsidy from the college, we couldn't do it," Danielczyk said.

But most day-care providers agree additional day care is needed desperately, especially for the infants and toddlers, Nelligan said. The Visiting Nurse Association receives about 20 calls a week from parents of young children seeking day care. "We have a tremendous waiting list," she said.

It is that need, plus community support, that Driscoll is banking on, she said.

"Everybody is in agreement that there's a need for more child care," Driscoll said. "Different places have told us there are long waiting lists."

Driscoll said the board will save money constructing the center by recruiting volunteer help and will sustain the day care through citywide fund-raising drives. She also plans to turn to employers, who she hopes will buy slots in the center for their employees and contribute money.

"I have confidence in the people of Burlington," she said. "I know it's not logical, but they've proven themselves time and again."