

Glastonbury LIFE

Business

Our Children's Place celebrates 20 years

by Nancy Thompson

Twenty-two years ago, when Justine Neild's son was an infant, she was looking for childcare so she could continue to work as a certified public accountant. There weren't many choices, and what she found simply wasn't up to her standards.

The solution? She decided she would start her own. "I wanted a center I would want my children to be at," she said. Our Children's Place Learning Center was the result.

It may sound like a stretch for an accountant to get into the childcare business, but in Ms. Neild's case, it made a lot of sense. She grew up in Wethersfield, moved to Glastonbury in 1977 and attended Stonehill College, where she planned to get a degree in early childhood education.

"I started babysitting at nine and was always involved with children," she said. "My brother was eight years younger, and the family across the street had four children who I just adored."

As it happened, Stonehill started dropping many of its early childhood courses after she enrolled and Ms. Neild was concerned that she wouldn't be able to meet Connecticut's strict requirements for certification in that field.

"I wasn't sure I'd get a job," she said. "But I was always really good at math, and my uncle who worked for the state suggested that I go into accounting instead."

She changed her major to accounting, but not without some regret.

"I followed my heart into education, then went into accounting so I could get a job," she said. It wasn't her first choice for a career, but she stuck with it. "When doing accounting, I put my heart and soul into it," she said. "I respected the people I worked for and I learned a lot." She earned her CPA designation and was doing the books for a developer when she became pregnant. After her son was born, she hired a nanny and did some part-time work, including an audit for a daycare center.

"I wasn't impressed with the way the place was run and felt I could do it better," she said. She visited several daycare centers and was most impressed by a center in New Haven. "It was an old facility, but the kids thrived, learning through play," she said. She continued to do a lot of research and eventually put plans together for My Children's Place.

Since her father worked in construction and she had worked for a developer, she decided to be her own contractor. It wasn't easy. "I had a trailer on the site and was typing policies for the center while overseeing construction," she said, adding that she also was doing some accounting on the side.

The center opened in March of 1990.

"We kept a low profile. We didn't even have a sign," she said. "I wanted to be an example, so I hired teachers who showed a passion for education and caring."

Ms. Neild said she and her staff stress health and safety while offering a loving, educationally enriched program. "If it's not clean and healthy, it can't be anything," she said. "We're not dust-proof, but it's a big emphasis for us."

Our Children's Place, along with the nearby Super Kids, which Ms. Neild also owns, offers a variety of programs for infants through 12-year-olds. A total of 18 staff members — 15 full-time and three part-time — provide before- and after-school care for school-aged children, full-time care for preschoolers and summer programs for all. Many have four-year degrees, and the others have years of experience working with young children. "We have academics, sports, art and field trips," Ms. Neild said. "It's a nice mix, a lot of fun."

The center's curriculum reflects her own belief that young children learn a variety of age-appropriate skills, including geography. Yes, geography. Every room at Our Children's Place has at least one inflatable globe, and maps are prevalent.

"Our children will be world travelers," Ms. Neild said. "They'll be communicating with other languages and cultures. We want the kids to be involved and enthusiastic."

Parents love it

Ms. Neild and her staff must be doing something right. Many of their children are younger siblings of recent graduates or children in older classes.

Karen Schulz enrolled her oldest son, Joey, when he was four months old. Joey is now eight and will be entering third grade at Hebron Avenue School in the fall. His brothers, Nate, 5, and Evan, 3, are students at Our Children's Place.

"I visited many centers and was happy when Our Children's Place had an opening in the infant room for when I was returning to work," Ms. Schulz said. "Joey has a December birthday so instead of sending him to public school kindergarten at age four we did the private kindergarten at Our Children's Place. He had a great year and was



Justine Neild, director of Our Children's Place, talks with Liam Easton on the loft in the four-year-old room.



Lily Seagull jumps off a child-sized playscape at Our Children's Place.

well prepared to enter into a much larger kindergarten at Hebron Avenue the following September."

She said she and her husband are impressed with the staff.

"All of my boys had the same caregiver in the baby room, and many times, the boys will have had the same teacher in the other rooms. The teachers truly love them. They let us know when they have great days, and when they need a little reminding. We really love the teachers."

Daniel and Michelle Seagull of South Glastonbury have two children at the center, three-year-old Lily and 14-month-old Matthew.

Mr. Seagull said he and his wife like the low turnover rate among the staff.

"We're impressed by the stability of both the center staff and families who use the center," he said. "Since we have been there the daily management team has been the same as have most of the teachers. Lily's friends are mostly the same kids with whom she was crawling around the infant room with; they play amazingly well together, and people are surprised at their cooperation and friendship when they are together away from the center."

Patti Muldoon, also from South Glastonbury and the mother of three children who have graduated from Our Children's Place and attend summer camp at Super Kids, had a similar comment.

"What impresses us most about Our Children's Place is the quality and longevity of the teachers. Wanda had all my babies in her infant room, and I think she's still there. I've always felt that my kids got plenty of nurturing, and that the teachers really care about the kids," she said. "The other night my husband asked Kyle, our eight-year-old, what would be his dream vacation. He said Super Kids."

Kathy Kamienski of Marlborough has a three-year-old and a four-month-old at Our Children's Place as well as a six-year-old graduate of the program. "We are so glad we found Our Children's Place," she said. "We came to them after having left a different daycare facility due to some major issues with staffing and care at the other center. Our Children's Place has been absolutely fantastic caring for my kids at all ages," she added. "The staff is always pleasant and helpful. And when my oldest was having some adjustment problems they helped us work with him, put a plan in place to get him back on track and fully supported us. This also can be said when my three-and-a-half-year old was taking forever to potty train. The center helped us try different methods and together we were able to have a really consistent message and did successfully get my daughter trained. The infant care is very hands-on and loving as well. I'm told my youngest smiles all day long and he is always happy when I pick him up and drop him off. My children have loved going here."

Ms. Neild has a simple explanation for all the rave reviews. "It's the passion," she said. **GL**

Our Children's Place is at 30 Quarry Road near New London Turnpike.

The phone is 860-659-4766, and the website is ourchildrensplacechildcare.com.



Rebecca Tressler, head teacher of the young-three-year-old program at Our Children's Place, pours some paint for Christopher Hotchkiss as Elizabeth Allen looks on.