

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."

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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 center 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



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

Free Press Photo by ELAINE ISAACSON

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.

Turn to **DAY-CARE, Page 2B**