

Celebrating 45 Years of the Concord Children's Center

In the Spring of 1975, I was teaching at Concord Academy while juggling childcare for my toddler daughter. I hired students to care for her when I had a class and when they failed to show up, which they often did, I took her to class with me. The only childcare available in town other than limited home based family day care were nursery schools with a morning schedule, three or four days a week, clearly not an option for working mothers. There was no after school care either so elementary school parents had to scrape together childcare arrangements or leave their children alone until they returned home from work. I was one of the 45% of working mothers across this country who struggled to find reliable childcare.

Desperate for a solution to my problem, I decided to start my own day care center. Fortunately, I met another young working mother who had just moved to town, from New York City where she had previously started a day care center when her children were in preschool. Deborah Begner now had two school age children who needed after school care. She shared my vision of a children's center that would offer working mothers reliable and flexible childcare.

My vision was inspired by three social movements of the time. The first was from educators and researchers working in the field of early childhood development who knew that the experiences we all have when we are very young, shape and deeply influence the rest of our lives. They knew that the early years of human development are crucial for our emotional, physical and cognitive health. I had just completed my graduate degree in education at Lesley University and dreamed of opening my own progressive school for young children based on play and exploring nature where children would be free to learn by doing, using all their senses in a safe setting with qualified early childhood teachers.

The second came from the Peace Movement. The Vietnam war had just ended in April of this year with the fall of Saigon. Young people had demonstrated and protested the US involvement in the war and the idea of world peace was one that motivated many of us to take action however we could. A popular saying at the time was, *Think globally, act locally*. As a teacher, I thought about what contribution I could make and believed in Gandhi's non-violent approach adopted by peace activists. His statement, *If we are to reach real peace in this world, we shall have to begin with the children* inspired me to recognize the vital importance of teaching children social and emotional skills while they were young.

The third grew from the Women's Movement of the late 1960's and '70's. While each year, more and more mothers of young children, entered the workplace, the lack of a national childcare system meant that those women now had to scramble to find care. In a town like Concord, day care was still considered something that was appropriate only for women who "had to work" because they had no husbands to support them. The idea of a day care center was a radical one at the time because it challenged two prevailing concepts. The first was that it was a mother's primary responsibility to stay home and take care of her own children. Just three years earlier, I had to quit my job when I got pregnant since it was written into my public-school teacher's contract. The second concept was that if a mother chose to work, childcare was her own individual problem to solve rather than a shared societal responsibility. The Women's Movement challenged these outdated ideas and helped highlight childcare as an underlying social issue of equal rights and government's responsibility to families.

While European countries were already offering free or subsidized day care, the US lagged behind with no comprehensive program and unfortunately, not much has changed in the last 45 years. When Senator Elizabeth Warren was on the campaign trail for president in 2020, she often told a story of her difficulty finding care for her daughter and has never forgotten her struggle shared by so many working mothers.

Warren has made childcare is one of her signature issues emphasizing that it is an essential aspect of equal rights. She has urged the government to include childcare as part of the infrastructure bill. Recently, U.S. First Lady Jill Biden and Kate Middleton, Duchess of Cambridge, released a joint statement reminding us that “there are few issues more worthy of our attention than the transformative power of early childhood care and education for our communities and nations.” President Biden has taken this statement seriously and included childcare as an integral part of his American Families Plan. In 2020, 81% of working mothers with children ages 6 to 17 and 77% of mothers with children under age 6 worked full time. With adequate, reliable, affordable childcare, families are healthier and more economically stable.

Even in 1975, the need for childcare in Concord was so urgent that we immediately attracted the enthusiastic support of many members of the community. Mary Shorey, Claire Griffiths and Linda Corbett, women activists and other young mothers helped us with all the legal and logistical tasks. As for the finances, we asked the loan officer at our local bank for a business loan. He turned us down telling us that we were too much of a risk since we had “no collateral”.

We were not going to give up our vision just because we were denied a loan and we quickly found other sources of support. The Concord Public Schools offered us reduced rent for three large classrooms at the recently closed Harvey Wheeler School and they also donated essential classroom tables and chairs. Two local business owners, Mr. Phillips, of Phillips Hardware and Mr. Forbes of the West Concord 5&10 generously offered us lines of credit so that we could buy school supplies, paint and cleaning supplies. Mrs. Smith, the children’s librarian at the Fowler Library told us we could borrow as many picture books as we wanted for as long as we needed. Several families including the Becker and Mollo-Christensen families donated their energy, time and materials to build some necessary equipment like a sandbox and playhouse corner and a loft.

That September, we greeted our first class of fifteen three and four year-olds and an after-school class of ten students whose parents took a leap of faith and trusted us with their children. Including ourselves, we had five teachers and just enough income from tuition to cover salaries, supplies and rent. Each year, our program expanded the number of families we served. In 1981, to meet the growing demand, we opened a second location on the other side of town at the Ripley School. Then in 1986, the center opened a third location across from Emerson Hospital for infants and toddlers.

In 2001, the center raised a million dollars to build a beautiful new facility designed by Michael Rosenfeld, a former parent and local architect, on the former playground of the Harvey Wheeler site. His partner, Andrew Goldstein, also a former parent, managed the project.

In 2012, Penni Hensley Wagner, Ripley site director, had a vision of a nature-based playground for all ages and abilities. Jennifer Brooke, landscape architect and CCC parent, assisted by another parent, Joan Ferguson, and Concord naturalist Cherry Corrie designed the playground. This multi-year project was managed by a group of volunteers, The Friends of Ripley Playscape, headed by Edith Hetling who coordinated the fundraising as well. They have raised \$338,000 to date thanks to generous grants and donations from many sources including the town of Concord.

In 2020, the center purchased a beautiful historic farmhouse abutting conservation land on Old Bedford Road, not far from the Ripley site. This new center will include a 7,000 square foot two story addition with six classrooms and community space which will consolidate the Ripley and Emerson programs into one building.

The CCC is much more than its buildings and projects. It is a community of teachers, parents and children, alumni, businesses and residents who have built strong bonds with each other. Teachers at the

center like Diane Krug, Penni Hensley Walker, Anne Doherty, Joanne Saideh, Lynn St. Germain, Kai Shaner, Denise Welch, Mary Heinsohn-Roe and many others have devoted their careers to creating a dynamic learning environment based on play, exploration and discovery, the foundation for healthy development. After Deborah and I left, the directors of the center, Kathy Reticker and Pat Nelson ensured the daily operation of the center. A volunteer board of directors oversees finances, fundraising, and long-range planning. The center has always been a non-profit school which allows it to focus on the needs of the children and keep the highly qualified teacher salaries competitive. While the center is a well-run business, its primary goal is not only financial but educational, based on nurturing children and supporting families.

This community is a place where lifelong friendships between families are formed. As both a teacher and a parent at CCC, I found that these bonds sustained me throughout the years and once you are a part of the center, you are always a CCC family. In my case, I was part of a book club of CCC mothers for over twenty-five years. I also met my husband when he walked through the door of the Ripley location looking for childcare for his four-year-old daughter 39 years ago. Four of our five children attended the center from preschool to after school for a period spanning sixteen years.

This year, as you know, the center celebrates 45 years serving the needs of young families. Our first class of preschoolers are now approaching their 50th birthdays and some of them have grandchildren who attended our center. There are currently about 220 children enrolled from Concord and twenty nearby towns. With an annual multi-million-dollar budget and three locations, the center employs forty teachers. During the pandemic, the center faced many challenges but with a strong staff and the support of parents and alumni, it continued to provide care remotely at first and then back in the buildings as soon as possible to ensure that parents could count on childcare.

The world has changed since 1975. Technology has changed the way we do business, interact with each other and entertain ourselves. The pandemic reminds us that we are all connected to one another and that our lives can change overnight. It also highlighted, once again, the vital importance of childcare in our society. Our teachers were finally recognized as essential workers.

In 1975, I was a young mother of a three-year-old. Today I am a retired teacher and a mother of five grown children and grandmother of five grandchildren. I am humbled, honored and grateful to everyone who has contributed to the center these last 45 years. What humbles me is the deep and abiding commitment of the thousands of people who have been involved with CCC, far exceeding the expectations I had when we began. I am honored to be a small part of this community and I am grateful to all the people who freely contribute their talents, time, energy and money. I am reminded of the well-known Margaret Mead quote, *Never doubt that a small group of committed citizens can change the world, indeed it is the only thing that has.*

As we look ahead to the future, may the vision of reliable, affordable childcare, equal rights for women and world peace become a reality in this generation. May the spirit of the Concord Children's Center – Community, Commitment and Caring – live on.

With Deep Appreciation,

Christine Gerzon

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