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Non-profit children's center opens on Willa Road By CHRISTINE NEFF

When a previous daycare vacated the classroom space at the Unitarian Universalist Fellowship in Newark about a year ago, the congregation faced two options: find another tenant or launch a new children's center.

A task force made up of fellowship members discussed the idea and came to a decision: "We decided that we wanted to have a daycare that provides a service to the community that we could be very confident was in line with Unitarian values," said Laura Way.

And so began their involved process of renovating the space and starting a new, non-profit daycare. The resulting Willa Road Children's Center opened in March 2008 and now serves about 22 children.

The fellowship secured a line of credit and start-up fund for the daycare and supplied volunteers to help renovate the facility. But that's where the church involvement ends, said Way, president of the board. The daycare is a separate entity, and no religious doctrine is taught at the school, she said.

The center does meet two goals set forth by the fellowship: to make 20 percent of its spaces available to limited-income families by accepting only state, purchase-of-care subsidies for those students, and to treat staff "very fairly and pay competitive wages as best we can," said Way.

An experienced educator, Connie Merlet, has been hired to direct the center. Merlet of Newark has worked in the daycare industry for years and was previously employed as an educator for the Christina School District and served on the school board.

She has strong beliefs in how young children can succeed. "I think first, kids have to feel physically safe, then they have to feel really emotionally safe, and they have to really know that they're loved," she said. "Once you get to that point, then you can teach kids anything."

Merlet said the "family atmosphere" of the center, which has one large common room and individual rooms for different age groups, may distinguish it from others in the area. "There are really wonderful daycares in the Newark area. I think one of the things that makes us different is that we're not going to be a big daycare," she said.

The board plans to cap enrollment at 60 and focus on ages 1 through 4. "We're moving to a niche that we think we can do really well," said Way.

And, while academic curriculum will be important, Merlet stressed the need to allow children "time to dream," as well.

"We really need our kids going off to kindergarten ready to go, but we don't want to lose that sense of play and sense of dreaming, sense of wonder," she said. "I want my kids to be happy and to be able to use their imagination."

For more information on the Willa Road Children's Center, visit www.willaroadcenter.org, call 738-2008 or visit the organization's booth at the upcoming Newark Nite to be held downtown on June 7.

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