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**KEENE / WALK THIS WAY**

***Beaming over the future Despite economy, new Sophia's Hearth center to become reality***

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There were times over the past year that Susan G. Weber wondered how high the odds could stack up against her decade-long dream.

Last August, she stood with other officials from Sophia's Hearth Family Center in a 2-acre grassy meadow on Court Street at a groundbreaking celebration for the organization's new child care and teacher training center in Keene.

On such a sunny, high-spirited day there was no sign of the financial storm brewing that would send the stock market tumbling and bring the U.S. economy to its knees.

Within a few weeks, plans for securing the loans and donations still needed before construction could begin on the \$2 million project changed dramatically, said Weber, director of the family center at 36 Carpenter St.

"The world was pulled out from under everybody's feet, wasn't it?" she said.

But after several months of revising the building design to trim costs and continued fundraising, plans for the new center are back on track and construction is slated to begin July 20, according to Weber.

When it's finished in early spring 2010, the center — at 700 Court St., about a mile and half from downtown Keene — will be home to a full-time child care program for up to 40 children from infancy to pre-school age.

After the first phase of construction, it will be open to 15 children. Center officials will decide when to move forward with adding more classrooms after the center is up and running, Weber said.

The expansion of programs will bring three new full-time employees and a part-time employee on board — more than doubling the current three-person staff.

The center already draws students to its teacher training program from the around the country; the new center will allow the students to put what they learn to use through hands-on experience in the child care program, according to Weber.

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Training teachers in child care is a major function of Sophia's Hearth in Keene. Here, at the Waldorf School in Keene, participants training Wednesday are Uschi Friebeauer of California, on the beam, and Tonya Coulter of Vermont, behind it. The group is exploring balance in order to better understand the development of young children. Instructor is Jane Swain, not pictured.

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"We had always hoped to serve everybody in the world of early childhood in the region, but far beyond as well," Weber said. "It's absolutely amazing to see this finally coming together."

Weber was on the ground floor of the Sophia's Hearth Family Center while she was still on the faculty of Antioch University New England's Waldorf early childhood teacher training program.

Waldorf schools follow a curriculum, developed by Rudolf Steiner in the early 20th century, that focuses on interdisciplinary education, emphasizing academic excellence, experience in the arts and community service-centered education.

Along with other members of the college's faculty, Weber pushed in the late 1990s to include practical teaching experience for students in the Antioch program, which led to the opening of Sophia's Hearth in a room at the college, she said.

In 2002, Weber moved the center from the college campus to its home on Carpenter Street.

Since then, Weber and her small staff have been running play groups where parents can bring their children and interact with other new parents, and a professional training program where child care providers can earn a certification for Waldorf-based early childhood education.

But space limitations have kept center officials from offering a full-time child care program, Weber said.

The center's philosophy combines principles of Waldorf education with elements from the Pikler Institute, a Hungarian early childhood program based on giving infants and toddlers time and space to develop at their own pace without using educational tools.

"It's about giving the infant large amounts of time for free exploration of the environment with no baby equipment — no swings, bouncy chairs or ExerSaucers," Weber said. "Babies are on the floor, on something warm like a rug, and they get to move, to choose what to play with, roll, crawl and learn to walk on their own."

Older children will help grow a garden and explore nature on the 3-acre property that includes a field and woods, Weber said.

By offering full-time child care, the center will help fill a need in the community and support parents' choices, Weber said.

"What we hear from our parents is criticism and judgment if you stay home with your child, 'Why aren't you out using your professional skills?' and if you're out, 'Why aren't you home taking care of your child?'" Weber said. "It's sort of a no-win situation."

Increased access to child care was identified as a priority in Cheshire County in a 2007 study done by the Monadnock United Way.

According to the report, child care ranked as the third most frequently cited need among 70 community leaders surveyed and fifth most needed among human services professionals in the area.

About 60 percent of the families in the center's play group program are considered low- or moderate-income. While families will pay fees for play groups and child care, center officials hope it will be an affordable option.

"It's geared toward whoever finds the right philosophical match and the right environment for their family," Weber said.

And Weber says she hopes the new center will be a place where parents and children can feel at home.

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