

SOUTH BOSTON

For families on rise, a 'joyful' new space

Julie's helps kids, moms advance

By Kristin Erakson
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After bouncing around from school classrooms, to a church basement, and then to crammed quarters in the South Boston Boys & Girls Club, Julie's Family Learning Program has finally found a home.

Nestled in the George Robert White Family Development Center at 133 Dorchester St. in South Boston is 18,000 square feet dedicated to giving mothers and their children tools for building happy, healthy lives, according to Sister

Jean Sullivan, 66, cofounder of Julie's.

"It feels so right" to be in this building, said Sullivan, who is a Sister of Notre Dame de Namur, an order established 200 years ago by Julie Billart, later canonized by the church, to help mothers and children in need.

"It's now a place where women and children can come, and it's their home as well as ours."

The brick building previously was occupied by the South Boston Community Health Center. After the center chose to expand into new facilities, Julie's put out a call to Mayor Thomas M. Menino to see if they could move into the space, owned by the City of Boston's trust office, according to Bob Monahan, 50, Julie's director of operations. With support from the George Robert White Fund, which helps nonprofit groups rent space in city-owned properties, Julie's was able to move in, Monahan said.

Julie's has been in their new facility for two weeks, and the official dedication will kick off with a block party next Sunday. The cen-

ter is also encouraging those within the Southie community to take a tour of the new place.

"It's such a joyful building," said Sister Louise Kearns, 63, who is the other cofounder of Julie's and is also a Sister of Notre Dame.

"The women [in the program] took to it immediately and made it their own. I'm amazed at that."

Julie's Family Learning Program's history began in 1974, when Sullivan and a colleague, Sister Pat O'Malley, started the Montessori preschool, also known as Julie's Children House. The preschool targeted low-income children

and was based on an education that emphasizes respect for one another, said Sullivan. Parents also had to agree to meet with Sullivan and O'Malley once a month to discuss the progress of their children.

At the same time, Kearns was reaching out to mothers in Southie's D Street housing project, where she listened to women talk about how their lives were not the way they wanted them to be. Kearns set up the Adult Learning

Program, in which the women learned how to become self-sufficient, earn some money to buy basic necessities, and then become confident enough to look down the road to better their future, she said.

Though Sullivan and Kearns were acquaintances, and referred clients to each other's services, the two came together in 1980 over a typewriter. Kearns was typing out a grant at the St. Peter and Paul's Rectory for her program, and it turned out she was going for the same pot of money as Sullivan. The two got to chatting, and they decided that it would be better if they merged their programs together for mothers and children.

"It's a perfect fit," said Kearns.

Now that the Julie's Family Learning Program has its own space, it will be able to provide services to 50 to 60 families each year, said Sullivan.

Julie's offers family literacy training, adult basic education, apprenticeships at local unions, individual and family counseling, a licensed infant and toddler child development program, and a licensed Montessori preschool program.

For more information about Julie's Family Learning Program, call 617-269-6663.

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