

Teachers start new preschool

By Myrna Fearer/Danvers Herald
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Danvers - This September, three teachers will be taking a career step up when they become teacher/owners of their new preschool, Step Into Learning, at the First Church, Congregational, on the corner of Centre and Hobart streets.

Julie Chase, Patty Jones and Patty Sanderson have accrued more than 50 years of experience, most of them at Stepping Stones preschool at the Calvary Episcopal Church. When they disconnect at the end of the school year, it will be emotional and somewhat sad leaving behind the familiar and the parents, children and families they've come to know and love, but they are also excited about the support they've already received justifying their decision.

"Somebody said to me, 'I don't care if you pitched a tent in your backyard, my son is going there,'" Jones said.



"She said she didn't care what the space looked like," Sanderson said. "She said, 'You have such a great reputation, I'll follow you.'"

"When I picked up the messages on the answering machine for the new school, the mailbox was full," said Jones, who added that registration is on a first-come-first-served basis. "We already have a waiting list for 2010-2011. We had someone call who was having a baby. She wanted to put the baby on the list."

Former teacher and longtime Stepping Stones volunteer Norma DeLucca has also signed on to join the women in their new venture.

Preschool teachers, from left, Julie Chase, Patty Jones and Patty Sanderson, make plans for their new preschool, Step Into Learning, which will open in September.

For the three women, opening their own preschool will mean the fulfillment of a long-held dream to have a school in Danvers. The catalyst, however, was the closing of Learning Tree preschool at the First Church with the retirement of the teacher/owners recently.

"We had thought about it for years," Jones said. "We knew we could do this."

"We worked so hard for the school, we thought it would be nice to work for ourselves," said Chase, Stepping Stones director. "The child education field has changed so much. If we owned our own school, then we could make the decisions. We have enough experience."

"We all here have the same passion," Jones said.

Teaching for them, they say, is not a 9 to 5 job but a 24/7 commitment. The children are always on their minds and they tend to involve their families in all their projects.

For example, Chase's mom made the curtains for the school, her husband, Dana Chase, cleans the grounds and the children have shown up to help with the cleaning. Jones and Sanderson, sometimes called Patty 1 and 2, who coincidentally have husbands named Gary, recruit their other half, as well.

Gary Jones, an IT Director for Hancock Engineering, has helped fix computers and also designed the Web site for the new school; Gary Sanderson, who works for NBCR, the commuter rail company, has also added his assistance in many different areas of expertise. Sanderson's nieces and nephews have even been volunteered.

In addition to their personal and family involvement, the teachers also bring many years of teaching and life experience.

After graduating from the University of Maine at Orono, Chase married her high-school sweetheart and taught in an Amish School in Kansas where they first moved. Shortly thereafter, the couple relocated to Danvers where they raised two daughters: Taryn is a registered nurse and Danielle, a certified public accountant.

"When Danielle started kindergarten, they needed a two-day teacher," said Chase who had impressed the director and other teachers. "I went in for a few days. I loved it and I stayed for 30 years. When Pat Oliver (former director) left, I took over as director, but I'm still in the classroom."

Jones, who lives on Spring Street in the house where she grew up, is the mother of Elizabeth, a special education teacher in Lexington, and Justin, a student at Salem State College. She was always an involved mom and kids gravitated to her house all the time. Jones had earned an associate's degree from North Shore Community College in computer science and had worked as an accounting manager in an insurance company and also in retail. But, she was a natural teacher, which showed when she was with the young children.

This talent was observed by Chase and the other teachers when Jones' kids were students at the little school, and the creative mom was recruited for Stepping Stones. Naturally, she took the courses to become certified and licensed, something all the teachers have to do.

"She's wonderful with the kids; she has the passion," Chase said.

"I have the best job in the world," said Jones of her 15 years as a preschool teacher. "It's so fun."

Sanderson, who has 14 years teaching experience, took the secretarial course at North Shore Community College. She worked in an office for five years and in retail 12 years. Looking to change direction, she said she saw an opening for a part-time teacher at Stepping Stones.

"I took the courses that needed to be taken to be licensed and accredited," said Sanderson, who had found her niche. "I've been there ever since."

For the three women, it's been a perfect blend of strengths, teaching styles and personalities. The teachers constantly bounce ideas off each other and offer mutual support and encouragement.

"It's the staff that makes the school," Chase said. "Everyday we have fun together. Everyday is nice."

And now the teachers will be able to take their passion and enthusiasm and incorporate their own philosophy of "providing a safe and nurturing environment geared to promote learning in all areas of development for children ages 3 to 5" in their own little school.

"We always loved what we were doing," Chase said. "Our focus is on the kids and their families. Kids are so delightful. You truly make a difference and it's very rewarding."

For more information about Step Into Learning, check the Web site: www.StepIn2Learning.com, or call 978-774-8100.