

New Colwood daycare a labour of love for operators

Bilingual programs, ability to care for kids with health concerns part of services

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If you didn't know they were there, you'd probably drive right past the new Children of the Island Childcare Centre on Island Highway, which is tucked in the rear of a plaza near Colwood Corners.



Nancy Hughes St-Jacques

Also known as the Centre de Garde les Enfants de L'île, the facility officially opened its doors June 6 and is already looking to expand.

"Our wait list goes into 2019 ... this is all word of mouth," said owner Nancy Hughes St-Jacques.

The centre is licensed for 72 children and they're hoping to expand that to 80 in the coming weeks. St-Jacques noted they are also looking at acquiring a space next door that was once a gymnasium and restoring it back to its original use, which would give them space for another 16 children.

"By the end of the year we should be close to 100," she said, adding they should have between 12 and 14 staff by that point as well. Initially, St-Jacques was worried she wouldn't find enough bilingual staff members with both education and early childcare certifications, as every program offered at the centre also includes a French component. "I honestly was surprised and really happy ... I wanted to create jobs here and keep it all local."

So far, they've been able to do just that.



Emma St-Jacques, 11, helps out with some of the younger children, including Harper Lord, 2, at the Children of the Island Childcare Centre in Colwood.

Katherine Engqvist/News Gazette staff

"There's a niche, obviously, with the French," she said, but there is also a shortage of childcare spaces on the West Shore, especially for parents looking for all-inclusive programs or care for a child with a medical condition.

One child at the centre is a Type 1 diabetic who requires insulin and doesn't have a pump. While that meant Island Health had to come in and give staff special instructions on caring for the little girl, St-Jacques has no regrets in taking her on. "(My child has had) ups and downs and there was no question that we were taking her." She noted it can be a real challenge for parents to find care sometimes. "Both parents sat there and sobbed ... They couldn't find care."

St-Jacques, who hails from Quebec, has 15 years' experience in the childcare busi-

ness and 12 operating her own centre. Her family relocated to the Island looking for a better climate for one of their daughters, who suffers from lung-related health issues. St-Jacques said it was time for the family to reinvent themselves, but after working in an office for a while she found herself feeling miserable.

She decided to open her own childcare program out of their home on Bear Mountain. "When we moved here I just missed it ... This is what I love to do." After about a year she needed more space and enlisted her family's help.

"I just mimicked what I had in Quebec," she said. But licensing regulations are very different in B.C. than in Quebec and Ontario. They had to build the centre first before finding out whether they would be licensed.

"At the end it was all in their hands,"

she said of government regulators. "We just kind of jumped and didn't look back."

The couple took possession of the Colwood space on April 1 and worked quickly to turn their "diamond in the rough" into what it is now. St-Jacques noted her husband and two daughters put in a lot of hours of work to get the space open. "There's a lot of love that went into this," she said.

That's not to say there weren't sleepless nights and a few tears along the way. St-Jacques' husband, Richard, constructed a beautiful natural play feature for children to enjoy outside, but licensing requirements forced them to remove it.

Of those licensing regulations, the easiest to meet were the kitchen requirements, she said. "We have an in-house chef ... we're actually licensed like a restaurant." She joked that the only special thing they had to do to get that rating was to add a third sink.

Besides providing a hot lunch and two snacks a day for children in their care, the centre has a number of programs to help children develop. "For all of the kids in the centre, we have Zumba every week and we even have cooking classes," she said, although younger children get to use home-made Play-Doh.

Goodies from the cooking classes often find their way into the neighbouring Trilium Communities' West Shore Lodge. Besides sharing their baking, St-Jacques and her staff plan on having a Halloween parade to show off the kids' costumes, and Christmas carolling is also in the works for their neighbours.

The centre offers a number of programs for children, including group childcare from newborn to age five, before- and after-school care, preschool curriculum, professional development day care, summer and spring break camps and French tutoring. For more information go to childrenoftheisland.com.

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