

an inspiration

New behavioral health program named for longtime educator Rita O'Brien Dee

Community Teamwork Inc.

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Lowell » Rita O'Brien Dee spent the last 56 years committed to her community through Community Teamwork Inc. — a career that started in 1965 when she worked as a teacher's aide in the Head Start program.

Dee, who was a single mother of five children in her early 30s at that time, transitioned from an aide to a teacher in 1971.

“I always looked forward to coming back every September and seeing my new kids,” Dee said. “They came in like buds and went out like flowers.”

She spent 27 years at Head Start before moving on to serve children, families and the rest of her community through Community Teamwork Inc. in another capacity. Dee was a member of the Head Start Policy Council and to this day serves on the CTI board of directors.

Dee turned 90 this year, but the energetic and eternally positive Tewksbury resident has not slowed down.

“Rita O'Brien Dee,” said CTI CEO Karen Frederick outside the James Houlares Center in Lowell on Wednesday. “A 56-year legacy of community action and still going strong.”

Frederick, Dee, several of her family members, and CTI employees and representatives were outside the center on Phoenix Avenue for a ceremony to honor Dee and announce the launch of a program that will carry with it her name.

Dee

FROM PAGE 1A

rector of CTI's Early Childhood and School Age Programs, said the program will be a resource for CTI

The program — still in the planning stages — is called the Rita O'Brien Dee Center for Behavioral Health and Development.

Meghan Siembor, deputy di-

Dee » 7a



Community Teamwork's new Center for Behavioral Health and Development is dedicated to longtime parent, employee and board member Rita O'Brien Dee, much to her surprise. From left, are CTI CEO Karen Frederick, an unidentified woman and Rita O'Brien Dee.

Julia Malakie / Lowell Sun

‘they came in like buds and went out like flowers.’

– *Rita O'Brien Dee, retired Community Teamwork Inc. educator, of the students in the Head Start and other school programs*

wearing T-shirts with her smiling face on the front, along with the name of the new program.

“I had no idea,” Dee said. “I am just so honored. It's such a big thing and such a good thing. I love it.”

and providers throughout the area who are working with children with behavioral, emotional and developmental challenges or who have experienced trauma.

The Rita O'Brien Dee Center for Behavioral Health and Development — which will be based at the James Houlares Center — will be the headquarters for programs and services “ that will promote healthy social- emotional development, increase children’s success in school, strengthen children and families and mitigate adversity through trauma- informed care,” according to a program flier.

The program was kickstarted by an “ generous anonymous donation” and a \$ 20,000 grant through the Greater Lowell Community Foundation, according to Frederick.

“ We will begin working to do a needs assessment and analyzing the behavioral health needs of the children and staff in our programs and our community, identifying resources that are out there to support them, and identify the gaps in critical services,” Siembor said.

During Wednesday’s ceremony, Siembor listed statistics released by the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention that show 7.4% of children ages 3 to17 have a diagnosed behavior problem. Of that age range, 7.1% have diagnosed anxiety and 3.2% have diagnosed depression, according to the CDC website.

Siembor added those numbers “ are constantly increasing.”

The behavioral health of youth in the U. S. was dealt a blow by the coronavirus pandemic, which led to social isolation, financial hardships among caregivers and school closures. Siembor said the Kaiser Family Foundation released a survey in October 2020 that showed 31% of parents said their children’s mental or emotional health was worse than before the pandemic.

“ This opportunity really could not have come at a better time,” Siembor said about the launch of the new program. “ It enables us to meet a critical need in our community and address a significant public health issue, which is child mental and behavioral health.”

The announcement of the Rita O'Brien Dee Center for Behavioral Health and Development’s launch came as a surprise to Dee. She was led to the James Houlares Center under the guise that there was a grant that CTI

Those interested in making a contribution to help support the Rita O'Brien Dee Center for Behavioral Health and Development, can do so online at glcfoundation.org/donate.

Donations can also be sent by mail, to the Greater Lowell Community Foundation c/o The Rita O'Brien Dee Center for Behavioral Health and Development Fund, 100 Merrimack St., No. 202 Lowell, MA 01852. *Follow Aaron Curtis on Twitter @ aselahcurtis.*



community Teamwork’s new center for behavioral Health and development is dedicated to rita O'brien dee, left, who gives a hug to cTI chief Financial Officer Penny Judd of Kennebunk, Maine.

received and she was needed to appear for a photo shoot.

Dee pointed out she was driven to the center by a fellow board member. When she arrived, her family members were on hand, and people were



community Teamwork's new center for behavioral Health and development was recently dedicated to longtime parent, employee and board member rita O'brien dee, right, and she shared a hug with cTI cEO Karen Frederick at a ceremony announcing the new program.

JULIA MaLaKIE PHOTOS / LOWELL SUN

'We will begin working to do a needs assessment and analyzing the behavioral health needs of the children and staff.'

– Meghan Siembor, deputy director of CTI's Early Childhood and School Age Programs

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