

Learning Center's 'Free Store' helps keep families cared for

By Lisa Reisman

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BRANFORD — When Hindy Jaffee noticed her 2-year-old daughter outgrowing many of her clothes this spring, she despaired. All the stores in the area were closed. Besides, she was uneasy about taking her two young children to a public place.

Then she learned about the Free Store just outside the Branford Early Learning Center, where her son attends preschool.

There, she said, “were all these outfits in her size to pick from, so I was all set.”

It's not just children's clothes of all sizes, or shoes. There are boxes of toys and games, and stacks of books, videos and audiotapes. Near the strollers, cribs and playpens, there's baby formula, shampoo, toothbrushes and toothpaste, as well as an assortment of arts and crafts.

None of that is on sale. There's no need for a sale. At the Free Store, everything, as its name denotes, is free.

The customer service, it seems, is unparalleled. If you don't find what you're looking for, ask Diane Pappacoda, director of the Birch Avenue preschool. If she's not there, which is rare, call or text her. She'll find it for you. If you're not a Branford Early Learning Center family, no problem. It's free for you too.

Pappacoda said that former director Beryl Meiner started the Free Table about nine years ago.

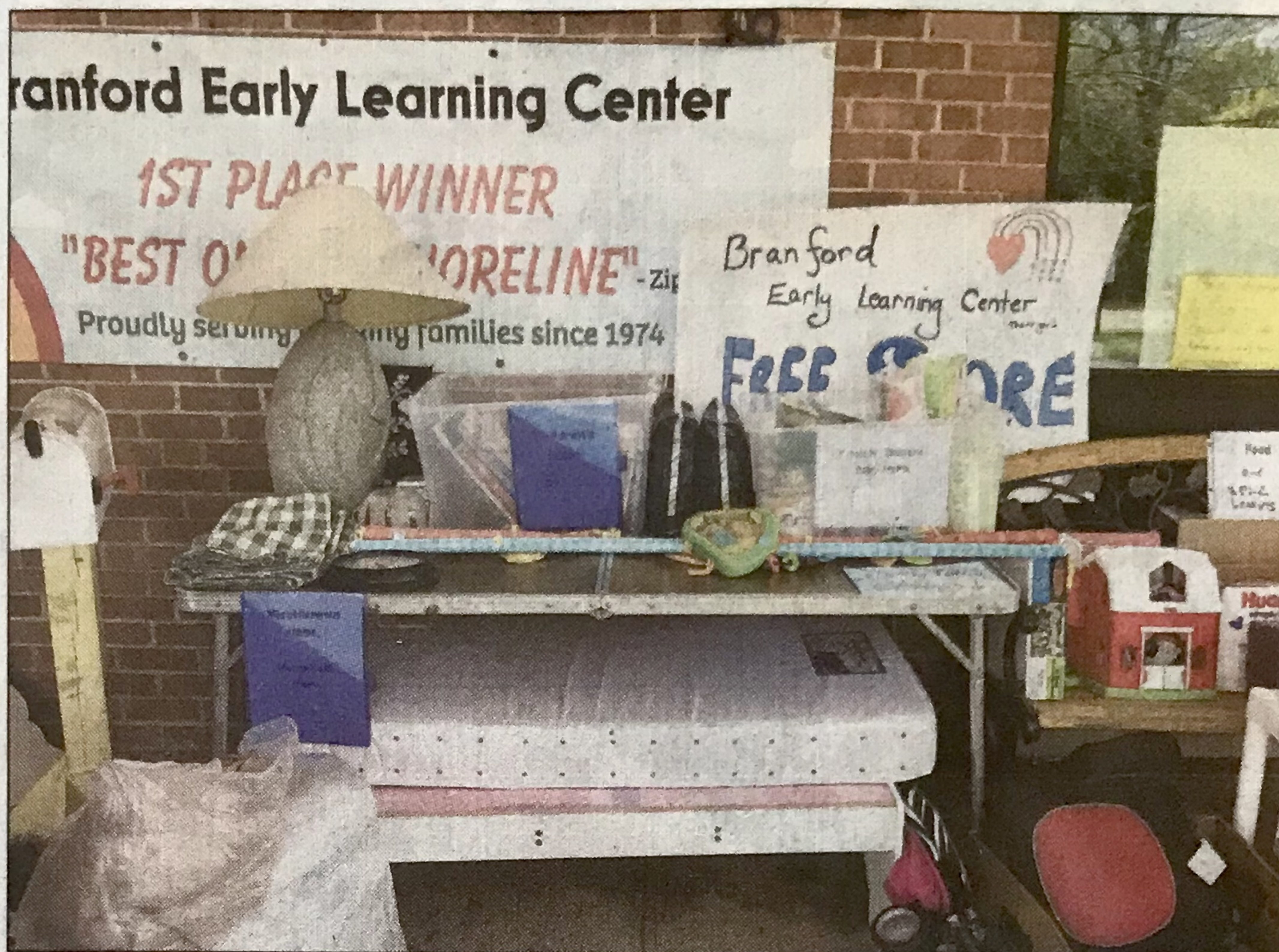
“The idea was for parents to donate whatever their kids had grown out of or pick up things they couldn't afford,” she said.

Then came the order mandating the closing of all schools in mid-March.

“Right from the beginning, Diane was constantly reaching out to families to see what they needed — food, clothes, diapers,” said Wendy DeLucca, whose 4-year-old daughter Stephanie attends the Birch Road school.

When a parent said she couldn't afford shoes for her child, Pappacoda decided it was time to move the Free Table outside and rename the operation.

It was a gesture in keeping with the generous spirit of the nonprofit pre-



Wendy DeLucca / Contributed photo

The Free Store outside Branford Early Learning Center on Saturday

school, which charges tuition based on a sliding scale determined by family income.

“It's so important to me that people have what they need and children have what they need,” Pappacoda said.

With figures this week from the Connecticut Business & Industry Association showing more than 472,000 unemployment claims filed in the state since mid-March — for context, the state lost 120,000 jobs during the 2008 recession — that might prove challenging.

Not for Pappacoda or her legion of supporters, it seems — even with 23 shoppers on a recent Friday afternoon.

Take DeLucca. She and her husband Robert heard the Free Store needed formula so “they went out and bought it for me,” Pappacoda said.

For DeLucca, “the store is one of the reasons we like to say Diane and the school are one of the best kept secrets on the Shoreline,” she said.

As program director at the Woman & Family Life Center in Guilford, she and Pappacoda have also collaborated in using their connections to find whatever's needed. And she has her daughter help organize the items that people have donated as a way, she said, “of teaching her about community.”

Then there's Branford super-volunteer Ken Engelman who, Pappacoda said, “somehow appears with whatever I need.”

There's also the parent who bought tubes of toothpaste and shampoo and donated them, and another who stops in to neaten up and disinfect the shelves and items, and the Community Dining Room which helps out with the diaper supply, Pappacoda said. Not to mention her husband Nick, providing support behind the scenes.

Neighbors have donated. “It's word of mouth,” she said. “It's everyone.”

Including Jaffee. Since finding the spring outfit for her daughter, she's made it a practice of getting to the Store to fold the freshly laundered donated clothes and keep all the items organized while her kids run around on the lawn.

“It makes them feel good just being there,” she said. “And for me, I just want to pay it forward.”

► To make donations or shop at The Free Store, visit the Branford Early Learning Center at 16 Birch Road in Branford. For more information, visit branfordearlylearningcenter.com or call 203-488-4512.

► All donated clothes are washed. All items are disinfected multiple times a day.