

# New Haven Register

*“All Our Kin teaches women all about the business of child care”*

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By Sandi Kahn Shelton

**NEW HAVEN** — Marie Gibson of New Haven was once a stay-at-home mom, taking care of her four children, unable to keep working at her regular secretarial job because she couldn't afford decent child care.

Today, Gibson spends her days running her own home child-care business, Butterfly Child Care, and her evenings getting a degree in early childhood education.

"It was always my dream to work in child care," she says with a big smile. The four children she watches each day are right now busy with a water play project, and Gibson is bouncing a baby on her lap. "But I had no idea how I could get licensed. I like to do things the right way, so I didn't want to open an illegal business."

Through a relative, Gibson heard of All Our Kin, an organization to help train low-income women to become early childhood educators, founded in 1999 by a Yale Law School graduate named Jessica Sager.

Sager says she came up with the idea for All Our Kin when she entered the law school in 1996, just after President Clinton had just signed the Personal Responsibility and Work Opportunity Reconciliation Act. This new law said that for the first time, low-income parents with children as young as 1 year old needed to participate in work experience programs to continue receiving public assistance.

Families were reeling from the news.

"There were very few safe, healthy places for these parents to send their children while they went off to work, particularly places for babies," Sager says. "So, in effect, parents were being forced to choose between economic survival and their children's healthy development."

Sager found what she realized was a loophole in the law: How about having parents' required work experience fulfilled by taking care of their own children as well as other people's kids?

"Parents would train as educators, which reinforced their commitment to their children," she says, "and in turn, families could build networks for each other, which would strengthen their communities, and they could have a built-in support system when they needed help."

She set to work with others from the law school, including Kim Rinehart who now works with

Wiggin & Dana, and with Janna Wagner, a New Haven native and Yale graduate who had gotten a master's degree from Harvard in education.

In 1999, All Our Kin received fellowships and donated materials and began with an intensive nine-month training program in donated space in the Brookside Housing Project. Six women came with their young children to a laboratory-type classroom, where a mentor teacher modeled the best way to interact with and teach young children, and then the moms got to watch and then practice what they learned.

"What we found," says Sager, "were women who really, really wanted to enter the workforce and who had always dreamed of working as childhood educators. The fact that they got to do work they loved and spend time with their families galvanized their energy."

Moms in the program — and six of them are accepted each year — spend half the day working with children (their own and others') and the other half taking classes on development. After the completion of the nine-month program each June, the women are able to provide much-needed child care to the children of other working parents in their neighborhoods. About 90 percent of the graduates get jobs and remain in the child care field — and many, like Gibson, decide to seek even further schooling in the field.

But that wasn't enough. All Our Kin then founded the Family Child Care Network, helping providers raise the quality of care in their home-based child care programs by bringing them materials, offering mentors and putting them in touch with other child-care providers.

"Being a child-care provider can be such a lonely, isolating job," says Wagner. "We have a number they can call any time to get support, to ask our assistance, even just to talk about what they're going through. They come to monthly meetings, and we give them ideas on how to work with the space that they have, how to run their own business. We think this greatly improves the quality of child care."

A third component of the program is the Family Child Care Toolkit Licensing Project, which reaches out to unlicensed caregivers, offering a series of boxes that guide them through the process of becoming licensed. Each box contains the paperwork, as well as health and safety supplies, toys, books and vouchers for CPR and first aid training.

Today, the program, which survives on grants and donations, serves more than 150 caregivers, who provide child care to 900 kids in the community.

Gibson says the program has made all the difference in her life — and has helped her neighbors as well. "They showed me how to make this business work," she says. "They helped me plan out the space, helped me decorate it and give me all the help I need. I can call them up anytime and they'll call me back."