

In the house

Built by its citizens, Community House turns 50

By Lisa Reisman

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THE COMMUNITY HOUSE, the center of activity for almost everyone growing up in Branford over the last 50 years, might never have gotten off the ground.

Without a man raffling off his prized 1949 Ford for \$1,000 and a group of housewives a transistor radio for \$135; without women's clubs running dances and neighbor-

hoods throwing block parties; without children digging and selling bait worms and baking brownies and shoveling snow; without an 87-year-old woman holding an estate sale that raised \$374; without any of the donations from 28 cents to \$2,430, the plot of land on Church Street, far from celebrating its 50th anniversary with an open house this Sunday, might still be a salt marsh.

Without the Hitchcock family, owners of

Atlantic Wire, donating that Church Street land; without Cosgrove Construction and Giordano Construction volunteering their workers' time and labor; without the Grange providing funds for furniture and two female members on the Building Committee painstakingly outfitting the lounge and the music room and the activity room, there conceivably could have been a com-

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Carl "Hop" Nuzzo, namesake of Branford's popular Carl "Hop" Nuzzo Softball Tournament, and its first director, Joe Trapasso, at the Community House in the mid-1960s.



Playing pool at the new Community House in the 1960s. Photos courtesy Branford Historical Society.



Getting down and dirty: former and first Community House director Joseph Trappasso teaching kids baseball fundamentals on Hammer Field in the mid-1960s.

Community House: Citizens built it and sustained it

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munity house.
Most likely, though, it would have

been “just a building you used, not one you felt belonged to you,” as former State Sen. Bill Aniskovich,

who spent much of his childhood in the Community House, put it, one that resembled every other town’s, housed in an old school or even a new structure built by some nameless contractor.

Without the donation of bleachers from Daniel P. Cosgrove, and of two scoreboards from the Veterans of World War II, there might have been a gymnasium in town, just not one that would go on to host future NBA players Calvin Murphy, John Williamson, and Sly Williams in the Frank J. Kinney Sr. Invitational Basketball Tournament; not one that could accom-

modate girls’ teams from across New England in the Joan G. Bradley Basketball Tournament



for 41 years running, or would welcome special education boys and girls for an invitational basketball tournament.

Without, above all, the late Joseph Trappasso, dreamer, visionary, public relations wizard, and benevolent authority figure, a man endowed with an “infectious enthusiasm,” in the words of former Police Chief Robert Gill, that made the people of Branford “feel they could be part of something larger than themselves,” there still might have been some kind of community house.

Probably, though, it wouldn’t have been one built with the quality of

materials to last more than 50 years. It wouldn’t become the envy of other towns and a model nationwide. It wouldn’t have

hallways that gleamed and doorknobs that glistened. Or offered

hundreds of programs and activities and events each year not just in the building itself, but throughout Branford. Or denied entry to no one, no matter their income level or the color of their skin.

“There never was talk of diversity or community,” said Aniskovich. “We all just got along.” And while sports and competition were central, “there wasn’t an emphasis on wins and losses. Sports for Joe was more a vehicle for learning sportsmanship. And, in a larger sense, building character.”

So, it’s only natural that without Joe Trappasso, there would be no Alex Palluzzi who, from the age of 5, observed the director’s every move, absorbed his passion and pulsating energy and impossibly high standards. There would be no director Alex Palluzzi who, since 1993, has maintained the building with the same exacting care, continued the summer playground program originated by his mentor, and kept the open-door policy with the philosophy that “the more people we can get into the mainstream of activities, the better.”

Without Palluzzi, there would be no Dale Izzo, Palluzzi’s assistant director, to come up with the idea of the Unkafeller Center ice skating rink on the Green and a Jazz Series that each Thursday evening draws hundreds, as well as a host of other activities and events. There would be no

The Branford Community House when it was first built in 1963, photo courtesy Branford Historical Society. Below as it stands today turning 50.



Left to right: Jim Tucker, Victor Amatori, Andrea Steady, Alex Palluzzi, Dale Izzo, Monica Sullivan, Russ Burrows and Marcel “Butch” Gote. Present-day photos Lisa Reisman.



Andrea Steady, the program coordinator who ensures that the summer playground program offers every kid who attends the time of their lives; no program supervisor Victor Amatori or maintenance supervisor Marcel “Butch” Gote or administrative assistant Monica Sullivan, all of them, year after year for upwards of 25 years, hard at work behind the scenes, making everything happen, from con-

tra dancing to karate to condo association meetings to the annual old-fashioned Spelling Bee and the Easter Egg Hunt. Without Palluzzi and his staff and Bill O’Brien, a commissioner on the Recreation Board, there would be no Branford Hall of Fame, no framed pictures of faces that line the cinderblock walls, giving the pristine hallway the peculiar air of living history. There would be no skateboard



Above, a file box keeps a record of every donation down to 28 cents. Photo: Lisa Reisman.

park to the side of the building, affording kids a safer place to perfect their latest jumps than the steps of Blackstone Library or the town hall. There would be no playground improvement project to replace outdated swing sets and slides and jungle gyms with state-of-the-art equipment. Or award-winning pesticide-free playing fields or “Summer Saver” Awards for reducing energy usage and air pollution during the summer months. Of course, there still might have been a community house in Branford. Just not the Community House. Or, as Palluzzi likes to call it, “the Community’s House.”

The Branford Community House 50th open house anniversary celebration will start at 1 p.m. on Sunday, Dec. 1, 46 Church St., Branford. For more information, call 203-488-8304.