As a new sign was erected on Sept. 25 naming the East Hampton Day Care Learning Center in honor of Eleanor Whitmore, second from left, the center's co-chairwomen Connie Randolph and Linda Calder, young students, and the director, Maureen Wikane, gathered to commemorate the occasion. Durell Godfrey

Eleanor Whitmore has been a driving force behind the East Hampton Day Care Learning Center for decades, acting as advocate, booster, ambassador, and vice chairwoman of the board, and now the board’s honorary president. Early education, in particular for the children of working parents, is a cause she is passionate about.

“I’ve always loved children, and all that I can do to make their lives better is exactly what I want to do,” Ms. Whitmore said Tuesday at the center.

So it seemed fitting, on a milestone birthday for Ms. Whitmore, that it be renamed in her honor: the Eleanor Whitmore Early Childhood Center. Last week, the sign was changed and the new name became official.

When the board and the director, Maureen Wikane, brought the idea to her, “I was stunned,” Ms. Whitmore said. “It immobilized me. I couldn’t believe it.”

She is not one to seek out attention for the good works she does, and although there may be some point of pride in this form of recognition, for Ms. Whitmore it is more a call to action. “I’ll tell you what it will do; it will make me worry so much more about it.”
The nonprofit center serves children from 18 months to 5 years old, offering year-round, full-day care and early education. It also runs the prekindergarten program for the East Hampton School District. Founded in 1969, it had its beginnings in a modular classroom on Cedar Street that once housed East Hampton’s kindergartners, and moved in 1996 to Gingerbread Lane Extension, at the edge of the John M. Marshall Elementary School campus.

The move, Ms. Wikane said, was the result of “an amazing combination of things that happened,” all within a year. After beginning an expansion initiative in 1994, the center received the donation of a house in Wainscott from the Marden family, reached an agreement with the school district to run its prekindergarten program, and was left a stunning $500,000 by Ms. Whitmore’s brother-in-law, Willard Whitmore.

“He asked me what my favorite charity was and I told him the day care center,” Ms. Whitmore said. Construction began in 1996, and the first prekindergarten class graduated from the new facility in 1997.

Ms. Whitmore has attended nearly every graduation. “When I watch them graduate, you’ve never seen so many happy and proud faces.” She believes their time at the center sets them up to continue to do well.

“Statistics prove that 90 percent of the children who have had early education will graduate from high school,” she said, and there are numerous studies pointing to increases in academic and job success for those who have early learning opportunities. Of the 200 students in East Hampton High School’s senior class this year, 50 have graduated from the day care center.

“We have to motivate the children from an early age. Their experience here is critical and a real concern to us.”

Also of concern to Ms. Whitmore is providing a safe place for children to be during the day while their parents work — “women have to work” — and to do that for families of all backgrounds and across the income spectrum.

With the center’s name change, there are also plans for a new capital campaign for interior renovations and the goal of expanding to provide infant care, which is sorely lacking in East Hampton Town. “It’s essential that we have another room for infants,” Ms. Whitmore said, offering a longer list of needs that will take a great deal of fund-raising to accomplish.

Even as she moves into an honorary role, it is clear that Ms. Whitmore will remain as strong an advocate as ever for the center that is now named for her.