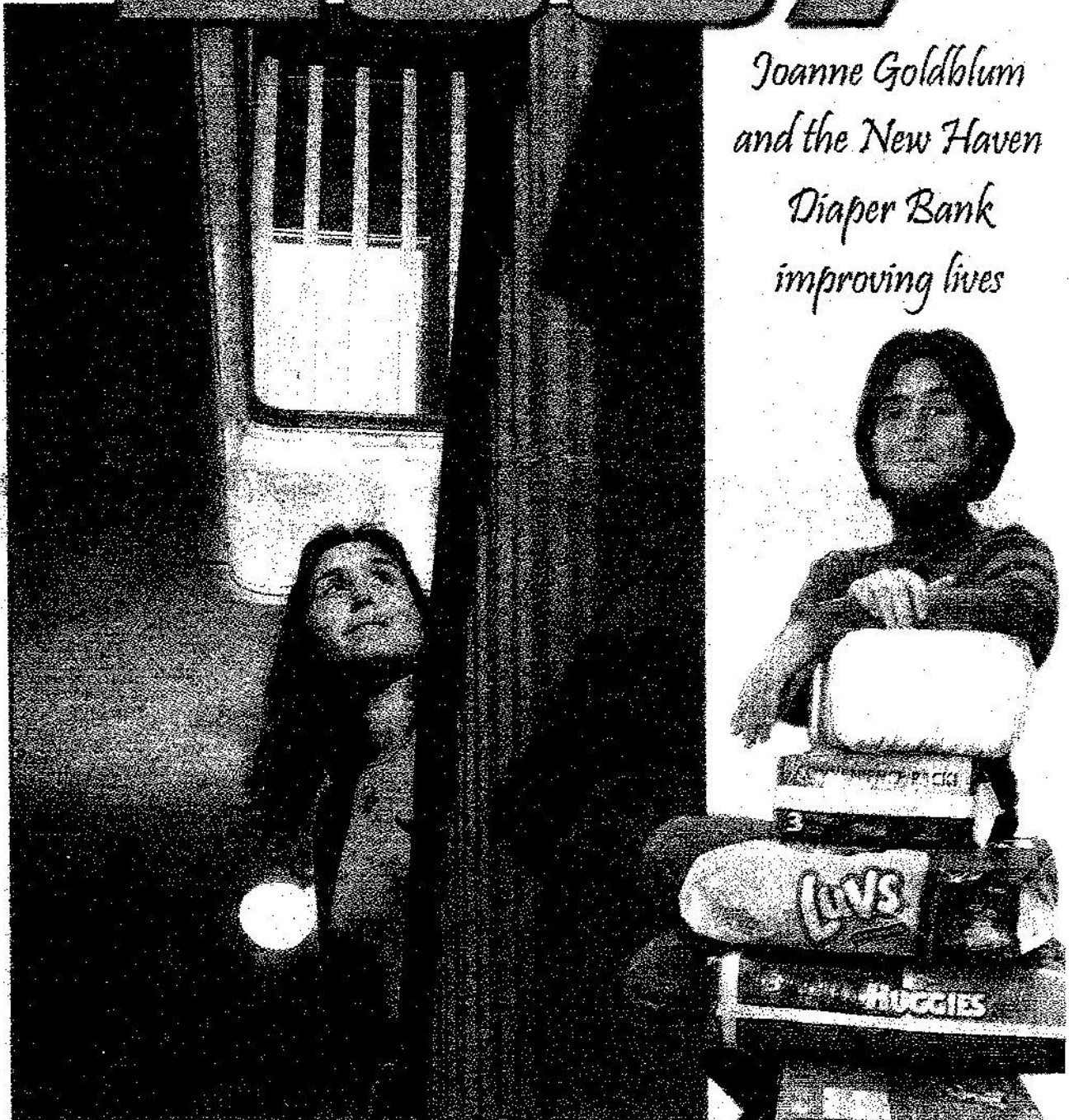


2007 PERSON OF THE YEAR

*Joanne Goldblum
and the New Haven
Diaper Bank
improving lives*



Peter H. Wozniak/Register photos

ABOVE: Register Person of the Year Joanne Goldblum, founder of the New Haven Diaper Bank, received a national honor in 2007. **INSERT:** Goldblum in 2004, when the New Haven Diaper Bank was created.

By Pamela McLoughlin
Register Staff

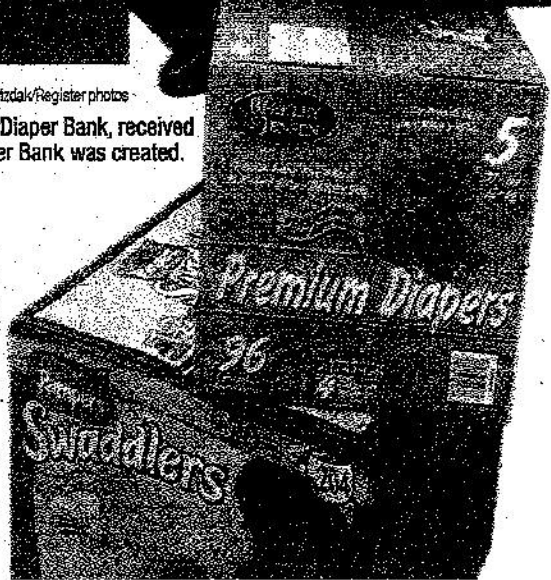
NEW HAVEN — Whether a caring parent can afford to change her child's wet or soiled diaper is a concern most people may not think about.

That included Joanne Samuel Goldblum, until as a social worker she noticed a client who never seemed to have toilet paper. Puzzled, Goldblum asked why.

"I can't afford that," the client said.

Until then, Goldblum assumed, even in poverty, that it wasn't possible for that kind of basic need to go unfulfilled.

"We talk about poverty as a big problem, and we talk about basic needs, but no one talks about what those basic needs are," Goldblum said. "If you don't meet basic needs, you can't meet higher needs."



Diapers: Register's person of the year has national impact

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The toilet paper revelation got Goldblum thinking about all kinds of other basic products that might be unaffordable, including toothbrushes, female hygiene products and diapers. Then she talked about it with colleagues and her husband, David, ultimately unable to resist the urge to help.

Goldblum chose diapers as her focus because she found they were the most acceptable product in the mix to talk about. She did some research and realized that dry, clean baby bottoms have far-reaching economic, sociological and health implications.

"We know that persistent crying of an infant can be a trigger for child abuse, and we know that a child who stays too long in a dirty diaper is more likely to cry until he/she is given a dry, clean diaper," said Wendy Kwalwasser, prevention services coordinator for the state's Department of Children and Families.

"It makes good sense from a prevention point of view that we help families for whom poverty presents tremendous challenges in meeting their children's basic needs."

Goldblum found there was a huge need for diapers among poor families. Food stamps can't be used to buy diapers and food pantries sometimes give away diapers on a small scale.

What was needed, Goldblum figured, was an organization that focused only on diapers. So, in 2004, she founded the New Haven Diaper Bank. In just three years, the Diaper Bank has become a charitable juggernaut that has garnered national attention. Aside from a diaper bank in Arizona, it's the only one of its kind in the nation.

"For some reason, poverty in children is difficult to talk about," Goldblum said. "This was not being dealt with. There are no subsidies for diapers."

With her husband's encouragement, Goldblum left her job at Yale Child Study Center's family support services department, solicited friends for donations and bought lots of diapers. She

lined up agencies in need and for the first four months distributed them each Friday from the family's home in New Haven.

Three years later, there's been a lot of change in diaper changing here as a result of Goldblum's determination.

The New Haven Diaper Bank will be renamed simply The Diaper Bank on Tuesday to reflect its soon-to-be-statewide growth.

Through a \$300,000 prevention grant received by DCF from the state, the bank will expand a smaller diaper bank in Hartford that was inspired by Goldblum's work and start one in Bridgeport. It is expected that collectively, the new bank will distribute 250,000 diapers in 2008, beginning in February, Kwalwasser said.

The New Haven Diaper Bank has gone from a grass-roots group to a professional organization that distributes 70,000 diapers a month to more than 30 agencies who distribute them to families. Recently, the bank added two full-time employees, but Goldblum's work as executive director remains unpaid. She figures that means all the more money that can go for diapers and acknowledges she's lucky to be in that economic position.

For all the lives she's changed for the better, Goldblum has been named the New Haven Register's Person of the Year for 2007.

It is not her first honor. This year, Goldblum received the prestigious Robert Wood Johnson Foundation Community Health Leader award. She is one of 10 people across the country to receive the national prize, which comes with a \$105,000 donation

to each leader's cause and a \$20,000 personal award.

Like others who have been named Person of the Year, Goldblum doesn't think she deserves so much credit, but others view that differently.

State Sen. Toni Harp, D-New Haven, who helped secure the expansion money for Connecticut's three neediest cities, said Goldblum's work has been instrumental in stabilizing hundreds

of families, because if you don't have diapers to send to day care with your child — as most places require — then you can't work.

Also, dirty diapers generally make babies and toddlers cry and she reiterated the link between prolonged crying and child abuse, Harp said.

"Something as simple as diapers has an impact on the economics of a family and the stability of the family," Harp said. "If you're poor, sometimes sanitary products take a back seat ... We should all be very proud of what she's done for babies in our community and our state. I'm very proud."

Aside from dirty diapers being linked to all kinds of social problems, there are health concerns as well, she said. Dirty diapers contribute to diaper rash, which is painful and can breed infection, in rare cases leading to full-body staph infection or even hepatitis. She said infants typically use 10 to 12 diapers per day and toddlers six to eight. Bulk retailers like Costco sell a 180-diaper pack for \$34.99, but a low-income family without a car may be forced to pay higher prices at a nearby convenience store.

Renee Dinkins, a perinatal social services supervisor at Hill Health Center, one of 30 agencies that hand out the diapers to clients, said the program has caught on like "a house afire." She said the agency gives diapers to between 80 and 85 families per month, up from 60 to 70 families. There's such demand that families are now required to register a month in advance.

Goldblum, who has three children, ages 10 to 15, grew up in Stamford, daughter of a patent attorney and a social worker mother who today is on the diaper bank's board of directors, traveling in from New York City for meetings.

Goldblum said her family moved to New Haven 12 years ago when her husband underwent a career change, from his family's real estate development business to become a high school history teacher. He teaches at Hillhouse High School.

For as long as she can remember, Goldblum wanted to be a social worker. There's the obvious influence of her mother, but

her father also did a lot of pro bono work for the American Civil Liberties Union.

"Certainly I grew up in a family that thought it was important to do things for others," she said.

As the diaper bank becomes more successful, Goldblum has received more grants and donations, but still encourages local diaper drives at schools and businesses. She said part of the importance of keeping the cause in the community is to raise awareness.

"This is Connecticut — kids should have their basic needs met," Goldblum said.

Cloth diapers are not a realistic option for poor people, she said, because most Laundromats do not allow the washing of diapers and, even if they did, laundering would be pricey. She said time is also an issue because some mothers are working two or three part-time jobs to make ends meet.

Goldblum was surprised to learn there are no entitlement programs for diapers. They aren't covered by food stamps and the Women, Infants and Children's program covers nutritional items for pregnant moms and babies but not diapers.

"Even people who work in the field were surprised the entitlements didn't cover the diapers," said Kwalwasser, who will help expand the diaper bank's reach.

"I think she's really brought to light this issue about basic human needs," Kwalwasser said of Goldblum. "I'm excited that she's getting recognition ... It (the Diaper Bank) runs on her commitment and her ability to mobilize a community."

Goldblum said there were initially many humorous suggestions for names for the Diaper Bank, and through the years she's heard the jokes: "No butts about it," "Do you take deposits?" "Diaper Genie," and even "No Child's Wet Behind," with a picture of President Bush along with it.

"It's OK for fun, but not in

"I grew up in a family that thought it was important to do things for others."

Joanne Goldblum

the name," Goldblum said. "By being cutesy it takes away from the seriousness of the issue."

Goldblum likes that the Diaper Bank has reached a level where she no longer has to do a lot of the basics, such as loading pallets at the warehouse in West Haven or directing truck drivers. Now she enjoys overseeing the big picture and working to change public policies.

She is also writing a how-to manual that will allow others

to create a diaper bank in their area.

Goldblum would like to see subsidies for diapers, but doesn't want to make them eligible under food stamps for fear the government won't raise the amount of total money given to poor families.

She recently traveled to Washington to meet with the staffs of U.S. Sen. Christopher J. Dodd, D-Conn., and U.S. Rep. Rosa L. DeLauro, D-3, and said they were amazed that diapers are such an

issue. Goldblum said she expects to meet again with lawmakers soon.

Although she's operating on a more professional level these days, there usually are still diapers in the back of Goldblum's vehicle, and although she gets the bulk of them from B.J.'s Warehouse, Goldblum can't resist a diaper sale when she's out shopping.

"I'm just a crazy diaper lady," she said.

PREVIOUS PERSONS OF THE YEAR

2004: Dacia Toll, founder Amistad Academy charter school.

2005: Kica Matos, advocate for New Haven's Latino community.

2006: Jennifer McTiernan H., founder CitySeed farmer's market.