

Cine-4 Closes, Becoming Early Ed Campus

by **THOMAS BREEN** | Aug 11, 2022 1:44 pm



Farewell, flicks: [Middletown Ave.'s Ciné 4, now shuttered.](#)

The lights are off and the popcorn's all gone from a decades-old independent movie theater on Middletown Avenue—which new nonprofit owners aim to convert to a bustling campus for affordable early childhood education.

Those are the latest developments with the Ciné 4 movie theater property at 371 Middletown Ave. / 25 Flint St. in Quinnipiac Meadows near the North Haven border. The theater showed its last films last week, screening *Mrs. Harris Goes To Paris*, *Where the Crawdads Sing*, *My Donkey, My Lover & I* and *Elvis*.

According to the city's online land records database, on Aug. 5, the Friends Center for Children Inc. purchased the 1.93-acre parking lot-and-movie theater property from Soffer Associates for \$1.3 million. The city last appraised the property as worth \$1,070,900.

The property's new owner—a Fair Haven Heights-based, Quaker-influenced early childhood education program—plans to transform the former movie theater site into offices, classrooms, a library, and outdoor play spaces for young children and childcare providers. They also plan on preserving one of the theater's four screening rooms as a community space for watching movies. (See below for more details on the Friends Center's plans.)



Start the early ed: Friends Center's Schiavone, who plans to convert cinema into childcare campus.



Shuttered movie theater's kiosk and front lobby.



Posters for Ciné 4's final movie screenings.

The closure and sale of Ciné 4, meanwhile, mark an end to that independent theater's five-decade run as one of the last remaining cinemas in town.

The four-screen independent movie theater opened its doors in 1971.

The theater survived the transition from film to digital. It reopened following a Covid-19 pandemic-induced hiatus, and after watching every other non-college-campus movie theater in town except for the Criterion Cinemas on Temple Street close up shop as suburban cineplexes, and then at-home streaming services, took over the industry. Now it too has packed up.

“There’s a beginning and an end to everything,” second-generation Ciné 4 co-owner Stu Soffer told the Independent with a laconic lack of sentimentality during a brief phone interview Wednesday. “It is what it is.”

He said the movie theater property had been “on the market for a long, long time.”



He praised the property’s new owner—a nonprofit run by local early childhood education advocate Allyx Schiavone—for her plans to breathe new life into the site.

“Allyx is a very good person,” he said. “Very knowledgeable. Very bright. She’s a good woman and she knows what she’s doing.” (Click [here](#) to read an article from August 2021 by retired former New Haven Register reporter Randy Beach about Ciné 4’s reopening during the pandemic, and about Soffer and his family’s decades-long history of running the local movie theater.)

Up Next: Library, Classrooms ... Screening Room?

So. Now that Ciné 4 is no more, what’s coming next to 371 Middletown Ave.?

In a Wednesday afternoon phone interview with the Independent, Friends Center for Children Executive Director Allyx Schiavone detailed her nonprofit’s ambitious plans to transform the former movie theater site into a vibrant hub for teaching, learning, and play for young children and their families.

Schiavone’s Quaker-influenced early childhood education program currently operates out of locations on East Grand Avenue and Blake Street.

It provides full-day childcare services 50 weeks a year for a racially and economically diverse group of young children ages three months to five years old, as well as free housing for its teachers and sliding-scale tuition for participating families.

“The early care education industry is in crisis,” Schiavone told the Independent. “It’s a sector of our community that is underfunded. It’s undervalued. It’s marginalized. ... The Friends Center has made a commitment to do all that we can do to ensure that children, families and educators thrive in a learning community for infants, toddlers, and preschoolers.”



She said that her organization recognizes the “huge supply and demand issue” of many more New Haveners looking for affordable early childhood education and childcare options than are currently available. And she said that, in order for the Friends Center to meaningfully increase wages in an industry that consistently underpays its workers, “we have to get to a certain scale so that we can have income coming in from a sliding-scale tuition that can allow us to raise salaries.”

In that vein, she said, the Friends Center is looking to expand in a big way across the city.

In addition to its current East Grand Avenue and Blake Street childcare centers, it’s planning on opening up a third site at the future Dixwell Plaza redevelopment to be built by ConnCORP. It then plans on building out a fourth childcare site at the Friends Center’s newly acquired Ciné 4 movie theater location on Middletown Avenue.

According to a Friends Center growth plan that Schiavone shared with the Independent, the group plans to expand over the next five years from serving 122 children and employing 39 staff members today, to serving 360 children and employing 118 staff members by June 2027.

What exactly does the Friends Center envision for the former movie theater site on Middletown Avenue / Flint Street?



[Allyx Schiavone at a March rally for early childhood ed.](#)

Schiavone said that her organization is still in the very early stages of development for this project. She said she plans on meeting with an architect about this site next week.

Nevertheless, the vision right now is to convert the movie theater building into centralized administrative and academic offices for the Friends Center, an educational materials library, a food service kitchen, and a teacher training center.

The offices will be occupied by the organization’s seven program managers, she said. When fully up and running, the site should be able to serve nearly 100 children, and will be supported by 38 educators.

“We plan to keep one of the theaters,” Schiavone said about Ciné 4’s existing four movie screens. “We’re going to keep that as a community space so we can show movies to the community on the weekend,” and generally use that room as a “presentation space.”

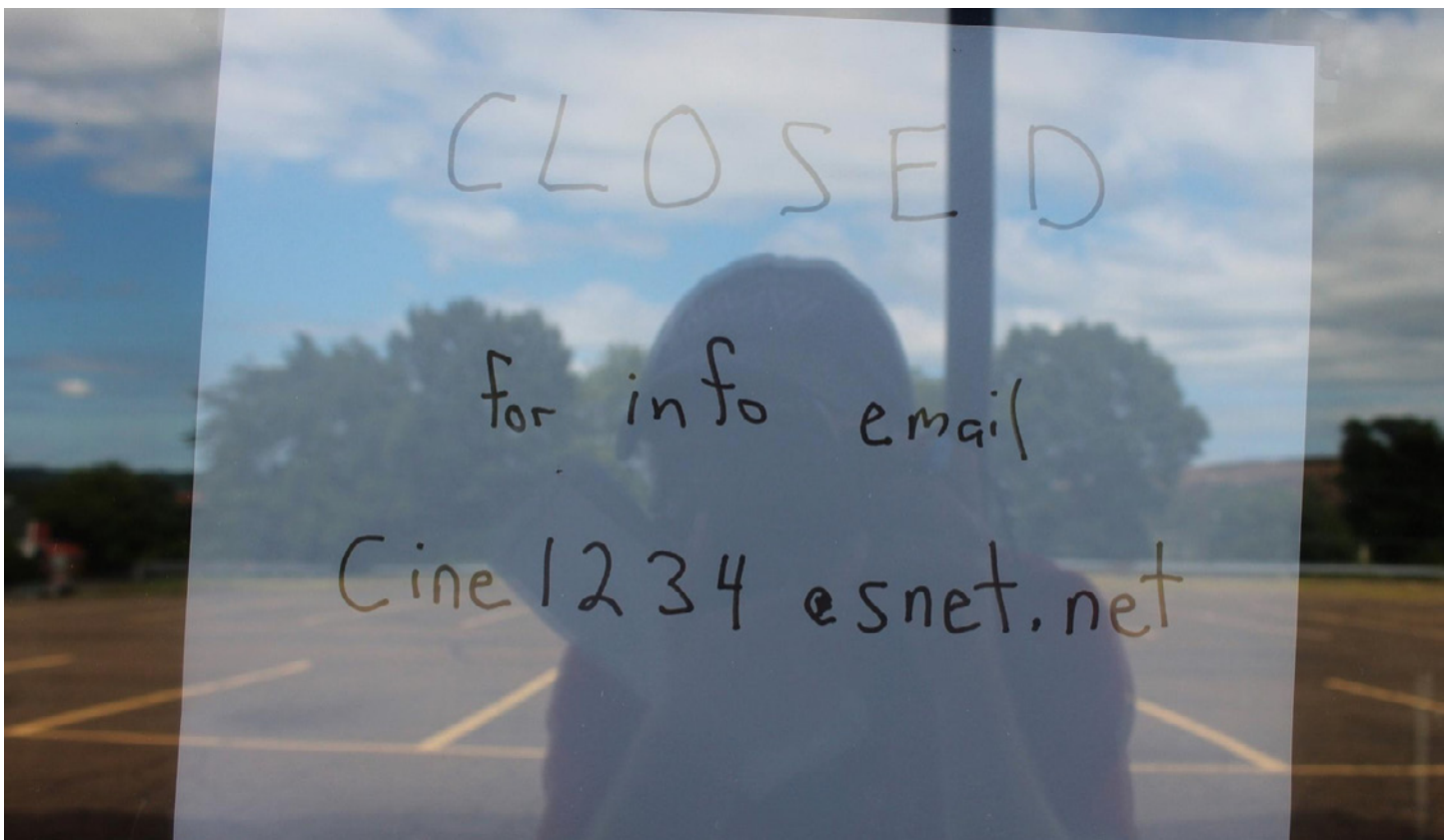
As for the sea of asphalt parking that currently surrounds the former movie theater building, she said that will be transformed into a “greenspace for our outdoor playgrounds” and into other, more aesthetically pleasing outdoor parts of the planned new childcare center’s campus.

She added that the Friends Center is currently fundraising and applying for grants to help cover the costs of renovating the existing movie theater building.

The five-year growth plan that Schiavone shared with the Independent underscores just how urgent the need is for the types of services the Friends Center wants to keep providing at a larger scale.

“New Haven is a childcare desert,” the plan reads. “For every 10 New Haven families looking for infant and toddler care, there are only two spaces available. These spaces are dramatically unaffordable for families and vary drastically in terms of quality and hours. According to the U.S. Treasury Department, for childcare to be considered affordable, a New Haven family with one infant-toddler must have an annual income of \$315,000. New Haven’s median income is \$41,000.”

“The next five years of expansion,” that plan continues, “propels us to lift up equity while we think about our community and the system at the same time.”



Growing up just outside of New Haven, Schiavone said she has been to Ciné 4 countless times over the years. “I grew up going to the movie theater. My sister had her first kiss in that theater,” she said. “Every single person I’ve spoken to has a relationship with that place.”

Decades later, she said, she even has a bit of the hometown theater’s history in her current home. “For my 16th birthday, one of my best friends climbed up” onto the theater’s marquee and “borrowed” the oversized red letter “A” that was used to spell out the title of a movie screening at Ciné 4 at the time.

“This is a space that means a lot,” Schiavone said. “There’s a lot of positive energy” at this former movie theater, she said. And, since the Friends Center is “in the space of providing joyful learning and opportunities for children, families, and teachers,” she said, she wants to bring that same positive energy into a new chapter of that property’s history.