

**State of Connecticut
Commerce Committee Testimony
February 14, 2013**

My name is Nicole Schmidt. I am Founder and CEO of a non-profit organization called The Baby Alex Foundation and a member of the Milford YMCA. We are all here today to support the Y's expansion and it's jobs creation; I am here to speak more personally about the human side of this expansion.

I have been a member of the YMCA for over ten years. I trained for my first Ironman triathlon at the Y, when I lived in NYC, long before I was married and had children. I thought the Y was a great resource back then. I had no idea how crucial the Y would be to my health and happiness until I had children.

My son Alex was born prematurely and suffered a stroke shortly after birth. His brain damage and subsequent complications inspired me to found The Baby Alex Foundation, which raises money for cutting edge pediatric brain injury research. We moved to Milford from London for its sense of community, the friendly people, the beautiful beach and the peaceful surroundings. My husband and I needed to recover from nearly 6 months of living in the intensive care unit with our son. We have used the Y extensively for Alex's physical therapy in the pool, karate, soccer and other activities offered through the Y for both our children.

When it came time to send Alex to preschool, we looked at the Y's program and many others. We chose first one expensive, private school and then another. In each school, we enrolled Alex, worked hard to teach his teachers how to care for a child with brain injuries, who by the way is brilliant, which meant recognizing his sensitivities to noise and stress. Our main concern was that he be in a safe atmosphere with kind children and understanding teachers. Each of these schools resulted in disaster. Out of complete necessity, after a bullying incident in the second school, we enrolled Alex at the Y. Within less than two weeks one of the Y's teachers pulled me aside and said, "I'm so sorry to tell you this, but I believe Alex has sensitivity issues." I was nearly in tears, because I finally felt we had found a place that understood Alex, was sensitive to his needs, and understood that we were a family in need of support. Both of our children are in the Y's preschool program and both are extremely happy, finally.

Why didn't we send Alex to the Y when we first looked at it? The reason was simply the lack of space. Although Ms. Sue and her team do an excellent job at maximizing their space, there isn't much of it, and there are plenty of times the children sacrifice activities because there is simply no place to hold these activities. In fact, the Christmas play this year had to be held at lunchtime, rather than at night when all the parents could attend, because the one and only space was in use by the adults. Furthermore, there is a waiting list for this preschool. If the Y expansion project were to be funded and finished, the children would have more space, the Y would significantly increase preschool enrollment and answer Milford's call for a safe and educational preschool.

But this project is not only for the kids. It is also to support another extremely large and sensitive demographic. I call these folks the *Slow in the pool, fast in the parking lot* crowd. The over 70 set. A 2000 study of the YMCA found that while other health clubs were losing membership, the Y was growing. Why? For one simple reason, the staff knew the members' names. The Milford Y is not just a place to work out, or a facility to hold preschool, it is a family. To the over 70 crowd, this family may be all they have. Last week, a gentleman celebrated his 92nd birthday at the Y. All of his friends from the Silver Sneakers water aerobics class showed up to share coffee and donuts.

And finally, there are the families, like mine, which have turned to the Y during times of crisis. During the hurricanes and snowstorms we showered and powered up and even worked at the Y, while the kids played in the daycare and swam to blow off steam. Dozens of families met together to support each other. Seeing the friendly faces of the Y staff made everything better.

This expansion project at the Woodruff Family YMCA is important to create jobs. But it is also important for three reasons:

- 1) The preschool kids, who are our future. They deserve a safe and comfortable place to celebrate their first school experiences.
- 2) The *slow in the pool, fast in the parking lot, over 70* crowd. They need a place to gather; it is crucial to their health and happiness as they face the aging process.
- 3) Finally, for the families, like ours, who have turned to the Y during times of crisis, whether those crises are personal or natural.

Thank you for listening and for your support. I, and countless other families, hope from the very bottom of our hearts, that you will help us fund and finish this truly important expansion project.