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Local News

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Teen Work

Teen Center Coordinator Mark Williams Has Hands Full As New Programs, Center Take Off

By DANIEL CAMERON

Journal Reporter

Mark Williams has had a lot on his plate since he started hanging out at the Niles Teen Center's new mall location in an official capacity as youth coordinator.

But he's just getting started.

Williams, 31, took over for former coordinator Clare Whitman Sept. 11. Coming weeks will see him toiling to increase membership, develop new programs, and develop an entirely new concept of the Niles Teen Center, which will be known informally as "the Apartment."

"The world is wide open in terms of programming," said Williams. "There's so many suggestions and ideas of what's possible..it's wonderful."

Williams first had to get the word out that the teen center had moved to the mall, a task he accomplished via a mass distribution of membership forms and flyers to area schools. Teens are allowed to register for \$5 each year, \$20 for non-residents. Williams has managed to more than quadruple daily attendance since the center's grand re-opening, accepting nearly 30 new registrations. Ironically, most of them have been non-resident Gemini Jr. High School students living in Des Plaines.

Williams has been inspired by the support he's received from Niles mall, government, park district, and civic officials on possible new directions for the center.

"Everyone in the village departments has been willing to use their facilities with the teen center," said Williams. "They really want to see this be a successful program. I'm very motivated to make that happen."

Though Williams has been busy with administrative tasks and catching up on procedure, he's had time to brainstorm teen center ideas, too. Using a previous grant from the Illinois Association of Park Districts, he hopes to organize a "Dance, Dance Revolution" tournament to fight childhood obesity. He may bring in wellness/healthy lifestyle experts from the village fitness center to help. A job shadowing program, resume counseling, and "field trips" to an unlimited number of hot spots around Chicagoland are also on Williams' mind. Niles Park Dist. Executive Director Joe LoVerde has offered any gymnasiums or park district facilities that would fit teen center needs for use.

Williams will use his experience teaching computers and web design to redraft the teen center's web site, www.nilesteencenter.org. He'll redo the header and add "room" navigation to the page to promote the "Apartment" concept. Web design experience isn't the only tool Williams brings to the table. The multi-disciplined former instructor is an enthusiastic outdoor sports hobbyist with a well rounded

background and a passion for making a difference in the lives of teens.

Since Williams was a teen himself at Maine South High School in Park Ridge in the early 90's, a lot of has changed, but the importance of making personal connections has stuck with him.

"Teens need adults that they connect with on a personal level, interested in hearing what they say, that they can come to for support," said Williams.

After graduating from high school in 1994, Williams spent five years at Valparaiso University, earning degrees in history, secondary education, and political science. He's since gained teaching experience in almost every discipline while at St. John Lutheran in Jefferson Park and Westfield Middle School in Bloomingdale.

Recently, looking to try something new, he was referred to the teen center position through his then fiancée, Colleen Phesen, who is employed by White Eagle Banquets, managed and co-owned by Village Trustee Andrew Przybylo. The couple were married on Sunday, Oct. 7. Williams' new wife is not opposed to dropping by the teen center herself to give it a woman's touch.

In discussing his plans for the center, Williams acknowledged that to drop by for the first time takes a risk on teens' part, too.

"Part of it has to be on their initiative to come to the center and take a chance," said Williams. "They have to put themselves out there to be vulnerable and try something new."

Williams must walk the fine line trying to keep young adults' trust and engagement while also gently disciplining them when necessary, he mused.

"I'm not saying I want to replace parents," added Williams. "A personal connection makes a big difference in their lives. I've made it clear to the teens that have come through here that I'm available to provide them with services and activities that they want to do. I'm open to suggestions from them, too."

The teen center is open Tuesday through Friday from 3 to 7 p.m. and on weekends for special events.

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