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Teen Center Reviews Exciting 2009

By TOM ROBB Journal & Topics Reporter

The Niles Teen Center saw a whirlwind of a year in 2009 that included major expansion of its facility and national attention for its programs.

Director Mark Williams recently released the center's annual report. In addition to the center's physical expansion in Golf Mill Mall, Williams said in his report that staff and teens from the center have been forging closer relationships with area schools, government entities and businesses.

The center saw an average of 23 teens a day.

During the 2009 calendar year, the center had 5,093 visits by 206 current active members.

Even though the center is located in Niles and run by the village, teens from other communities are also welcome to join at a slightly higher fee.

Membership at the center was broken down in the annual report with 45% from Niles, 21% from Des Plaines, 13% from Park Ridge and 7% from Morton Grove.

Last November the Teen Center completed work a 1,001 sq. ft. addition taking over an adjacent storefront in the mall.

The center received 33 contributions of goods, services and cash with an estimated value of \$92,000, with much of the contributions tied to the expansion project.

The Teen Center's entire fiscal year 2009-2010 budget is \$130,640.

"We are very proud of the businesses in our community and we thank them very much for responding to our needs (and assisting with the Teen Center expansion project)," Mayor Robert Callero was quoted as saying in the report.

Donations to the center ranged from \$50,000 from Home Depot for labor and materials used in the Teen Center build out to the donation of two wooden bar stools from Niles resident Barb Kruser valued at \$35 and everything in between.

Other donations included 20 computers from the Niles Public Library valued at \$13,500, a \$2,500 grant from Wal Mart used to purchase one 55" and four 40" televisions, furniture from Value City valued at \$8,000.

Other in-kind donations included food, video and board games, and even a bumper pool table.

With new space came new programming.

Williams began a speaker's series with State Rep. Elaine Nekritz (D-57th) in the newly expanded space.

"I don't know of any other community that I represent that has anything like this," said Nekritz in the report. "I think it's an important place for teens to gather and be productive."

Because of budget constraints and the availability of more space within the center, programming will occur less frequently on weekends or in hours when the center would not typically be open. Williams said there would not be less programming but needed to schedule where it did not create the need for extra staffing.

Major events in 2009 included the Halloween haunted garage that raised \$868 for the center, a job shadow day that collaborated teens with professionals for a day and a charity car wash.

At the Teen Center's annual Lock In Night at the Mall, 72 teens spent the night in Golf Mill last June.

Twenty-seven teens, one parent and a dog also represented the center in the Fourth of July Parade.

The center reached out to its surrounding community in 2009 sometimes reaching beyond Niles' borders.

In addition to collaborating with Niles organizations including the senior center where teens assisted 35 seniors with household chores and projects, Teen Center members also worked with police and fire departments, Niles Family Services, library, the chamber of commerce, park district and Golf Mill Mall.

Teens also worked with Maine Township, Niles Township, the Illinois Parks and Recreation Association and all area school districts.

Several organizations from around the country contacted the Niles Teen Center to see how they achieved their success.

Community leaders from as far away, as Windsor, Colorado, Massena, New York, Hampton, Virginia and Casa Grande, Arizona, made inquiries about how the Niles program has remained so successful as did a representative closer to home from the Park Ridge Park Dist.

"I would like to thank the Village of Niles for providing a safe, healthy and positive atmosphere at the Niles Teen Center located in Golf Mill for our young Niles residents. As a parent in these hard economic times it is a comfort to know that there is a place conveniently located where children can go to get help with their homework, plays sports and interact with kids their own age all while being supervised," the report quoted an anonymous Teen Center parent from the Journal & Topics Newspapers Speak Out section.

"I cannot say enough about the Teen Center and everything it provides. It would be a shame to lose any of the activities already offered there."