

## Niles Teen Center: Real chat, real room

By **PATRICK BUTLER** Contributor

Teenagers have been complaining for eons that nobody listens to them. So Kristen Speca is giving them a chance to be heard.

The student intern who's earning a master's degree in social work at Loyola University recently kicked off the first of her "Chattin' With Kristen" sessions with a no-holds-barred look at bullying -- especially on the Internet -- at the Niles Teen Center in Golf Mill Shopping Center.



**Teen Center staff worker Dominic Lopez helps a child with some math homework. The center was recently cited by Harvard University's John F. Kennedy School of Government as one of 173 government-run programs around the country as an example to be emulated by other communities. | Photo courtesy of the Niles Teen Center.**

"It could have been better," center director Mark Williams said of the inaugural turnout, noting the half-dozen kids who showed up for the Jan. 5 session "just didn't want to talk about that topic that evening."

But that doesn't mean they won't want to address the issue later, said Williams, noting that Speca's upcoming plans include a 5 p.m. Feb. 2 roundtable discussion on "Healthy Relationships" and a March 2 session on "Dealing With Peer Pressure."

"And anything else they may want to talk about," said Speca, who said she has already found the teenagers like a certain amount of flexibility.

Williams said that when he began planning a more formal speakers series last year that included State Rep. Elaine Nekritz, D-57th, Niles Mayor Robert Callero, a discussion on Internet safety with a local police official,

and a social worker from the Skokie-based Response Center who tackled gay, lesbian and transgender issues.

"I asked the kids what they wanted next and they said they liked the idea of group discussions, but didn't like them being limited only to those who had signed up (like they were for the guest speakers). They wanted the talks open to anyone who wants to come that evening" without being obligated to attend the other sessions, she said.

The flexibility is part of the Teen Center's style, said Williams, noting that, "To my knowledge, it's the only program of its kind located in a shopping mall," where teenagers are already hanging out.

The 2,500-square-foot center features 15 computers, a TV lounge with a 55-inch TV, as well a game room with video-game consoles, foosball, air hockey, darts, bumper pool and a collection of library books the center's members can check out.

There's also a variety of activities including dances, an overnight "lock-in" at the mall, which includes a movie at the mall's Kerasotes Showplace, and a haunted house designed and run by the members.

"It's not really gory or overly scary, but there is a lot of jumping in and around coffins. It's hard to tell who's wilder: the girls or the boys," he said.

The teenagers can also get help with their homework, do community-service projects like the past summer's car wash that raised \$625 for the center, and take advantage of the annual job-shadowing programs arranged through the Niles Chamber of Commerce, said Williams, who estimates he sees as many as 60 of the center's 250 to 300 registered members on an average day.

For more information on the center call Williams, (847) 375-8949.