

Helping kids grow up healthy, happy, and social

By Rick Kambic
Staff Reporter

Sixth grader Walid Krifah has been a member of the Niles Teen Center since February, and his mom has noticed a new boy coming home each day.

Some parents enroll their kids in after school activities because no one is at home when school gets out, but Fouzia Krifah registered her son so he could receive some mentorship.

"He has so much more confidence now," Fouzia Krifah said. "Getting help with homework on a consistent schedule and having other kids his age to interact with in a controlled environment has really brought him out of his shell.

He now initiates conversations with other kids and starts his homework on his own without being told to."

The Teen Center was one of 26 organizations participating in the inaugural "Lights On Afterschool" expo on Oct. 20 at Golf Mill Shopping Center. Mark Williams, the Teen Center's director, created the idea and ran the event.

Other participants included Cub Scout Pack 175, Boy Scout Troop 175, the Niles Public Library, the Niles Fitness Center, the Niles Baseball League, Brunswick Zone, Shims Martial Arts, Interclub Academy of Dance, Golf Maine Park District and East Maine School District 63's Total Learning Center.

"I really wanted to bring everybody together to champion the cause for after school programming, whether it's me and the Niles Teen Center, or it's TLC, or whether it's Boy Scouts," Williams said. "The kids and their development is our collective top priority."

Sihame Chaib, Krifah's niece, was visiting from France and was impressed by all the opportunities available to kids.

"They don't have centers like this in France," Chaib said. "There are some programs, but they're private and more expensive, and they typically involve more sports. I see a lot more variety here. This place is clearly meant to help the kids learn on many levels."

Chaib said one major roadblock for French students, compared to kids in Niles, is the school structure. She said school in France runs from 8 a.m. to noon and then from 2 to 6 p.m. each day, with a two hour break in the middle of the day that tends to cause problems.

While Chaib said French children are too tired after being dismissed at 6 p.m., Niles Police Chief Dean Strzelecki said that time is problematic for American children.

Strzelecki said more than 28 million parents of school age children work outside of their home, and that approximately 15 million kids return to an empty house after school.

"These children are left

unsupervised, which could lead them in many avenues, committing crimes, being victims of crime, car crashes, or worse yet smoking, drinking, or drug use," Strzelecki said. "Working mothers report that they worry the most about their children's safety between the hours of 3 and 6 p.m."

In communities rich with afterschool programs, Strzelecki said petty crime is down and graduation rates are up.

"We must increase support for after school programs and I myself, commend Mark Williams, Golf Mill Shopping Center and Mike Williams, and the Village of Niles for their commitment in maintaining this fine program," Strzelecki said.