

## Teen Center Continues To See Growth

For almost a year now, Mark Williams has been youth coordinator for the Niles Teen Center. Since his hiring, Williams has worked relentlessly on ways to bring kids to the teen center and invent more programs and activities that will want them to stay. Williams was hired just before the village decided to move the Teen Center to its new home at the Golf Mill Shopping Center last August.

With a new location and new philosophy, Williams has done everything from creating a monthly newsletter to appearing at local schools to promote new ideas that are sprouting at the Niles Teen Center. "It is a challenge to create my own programs," Williams, who previously worked as a teacher, said. "But I love the opportunity to create and work on ways to engage kids. That is really what it is about."

Williams wasted no time in spearheading a number of new programs including the Teen Center Job Connection Program that gives teens a chance to help their community by offering their services to senior citizens. The program has students help elderly citizens by raking leaves, shoveling snow or helping with other types of yard work.

Another teen center first will be the "Night-In-The-Mall" lock-in. According to Williams, the event will feature a DJ, dancing, a free movie and all kinds of games and tournaments for kids to participate in while they stay overnight in Golf Mill Mall.

The Niles Teen Center will also have a job shadow day where kids can shadow an employee in a field they are interested in.

And while the center offers a variety of different programs, its main goal is to provide a welcoming, safe environment for teens. "It is an opportunity for kids to spend time in an environment that is both helpful and fun," said Williams. "It gives kids a chance to do some activities that they might not be able to participate in normally."

The center is open Tuesday through Friday after school for kids from 6th to 12th grade. While they are there, teens can work on homework with the help of the staff or blow off steam playing video games or some foosball. Most of the kids range from sixth to eighth grade, but Williams is always looking to offer his services to anyone who needs it.

"A lot of high school juniors and seniors find something else when they are in high school," Williams said. "They don't need as much supervision or help, but we offer assistance with college applications and scholarship help. A lot of juniors and seniors are looking for community service to put on their resume and we offer them volunteer hours."

Williams continues to expand the teen center's scope, building relations with organizations all over the village. Currently, the teen center works with the senior center, the Niles Park District, the Niles Chamber of Commerce, Golf Mill Mall, the public library, the North Network Coalition, Niles Family Services and the Niles Family Fitness Center.

He is also in the process of working on a new website.

And so far, his efforts are paying off. Since Sept. 2007, the teen center has gained 60 new members for a total of 170. Members come from 23 different schools.

"Things are going well," Williams said. "We are focusing on offering the best program we can for the teens in this community."