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December 07, 2006 Special Needs, Special Place Bedford: Recently opened Clubhouse offers challenged youth an after-school outlet By VERONICA VILLEGAS / Special Contributor to the Dallas Morning News Before The Clubhouse, 17-year-old Abby Womack would go home after school, do her homework and then spend her free time watching cartoons. As a special-needs student at Richland High School, the opportunity for friends and fellowship just didn't come along very often.

Now, Abby said, she has found the companionship and sense of belonging she's always yearned for.

"They have a lot of things to do here, and I like the friends I've made here," she said.

Social outlet

Darlene Hollingsworth, The Clubhouse's founder and director, said that's exactly why she started the after-school program for highly functioning children and young adults with physical, learning and developmental disabilities.

"There just isn't anything out there," said Ms. Hollingsworth, 61, and mother of a 14-year-old son with Down syndrome.

"These children need a place where they can go to socialize."

She said The Clubhouse – a registered provider for Mental Health Mental Retardation of Tarrant County – also gives parents who often care for their special-needs children around the clock, with little or no help, a place to turn to.

"They can get a break, and they don't have to worry because they're in a safe place that understands their child's needs," Ms. Hollingsworth said.

August opening

The nonprofit opened in August with a handful of students and needs an enrollment of 20 to stay afloat.

It's operating on a \$20,000 start-up gift from a family friend.

Tuition averages \$160 a month.

Ms. Hollingsworth said she decided to start the program nearly a year ago, when she was laid off from her job as an accounting clerk and discovered that there was no place to send her son, Jonathon, after school where he would continue to learn and grow socially.

"In our setting, the kids get a chance to express themselves and build relationships," said Ms. Hollingsworth.

She has a degree in elementary education and Christian education.

"They're going to have the opportunity to develop and grow here."

Not fancy but needed

The Clubhouse is in a 1,700-square-foot storefront in a nondescript strip shopping center in Bedford.

In addition to the after-school program, The Clubhouse offers social time on Friday and Saturday evenings.

It isn't fancy, but with rooms for listening to music, watching videos, working on computers or playing games, it serves a purpose.

"I like it here," said Shawn McNeese, a 22-year-old with Down syndrome who attends Richland High School.

The statement of approval is huge for Mr. McNeese, who typically only replies to yes or no questions, said Ms. Hollingsworth.

A blessing, says mom

Amanda Marino, a student at the Transition Center in the Hurst-Euless-Bedford school district, said she likes it so much that she even comes to the Friday and Saturday evening programs as a volunteer.

"I like to just hang out and meet new friends," said Ms. Marino, 20.

"It's better than just going home."

Her mother, Wilma Marino, said The Clubhouse has truly been a blessing.

"It's been great for her," said Mrs. Marino, who also volunteers at The Clubhouse.

"It's given her a place to socialize and be responsible, and I know she's learned a lot."

Veronica Villegas is a Fort Worth-based freelance writer. © Copyright 2006 The Dallas Morning News Co.