

Star-Telegram [Fort Worth, Texas]

August 25, 2006 Featured story in the Northeast Tarrant Section - Front page. [Photos not included]

MEETING CHALLENGES

At Clubhouse, special-needs teens find a suitable hangout

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BEDFORD -- For Amanda Marino, 19, of Hurst, the Clubhouse is a place to meet new friends and choose from all kinds of activities.

"Can't get enough done," she said.

For her mother, Wilma Marino, the center provides a fun, safe place to go for Amanda, who has a learning disability and a speech impediment, that wasn't available before.

The Clubhouse for Special Needs, which opened Aug. 5, provides recreational and socialization activities for children 13 and older who have mild to moderate mental and physical challenges.

The 1,737-square-foot building is open after school and on Friday and Saturday nights. The Clubhouse gets about three to four participants a day. Its organizers hope to eventually reach 20 children a day.

The first room visitors enter is the Cafe, where guests can talk and play board games on tables, or air hockey or table soccer.

Next is the computer room and library, which also has a video game system. The gym has table tennis and several beanbag chairs. The lounge is equipped with a TV set and sofas.

Founder Darlene Hollingsworth began planning the Clubhouse last year after she quit her job to spend more time with her son, Jonathan, who has Down syndrome.

She realized other parents face similar problems finding supervised activities for their teenagers with such challenges.

She looked and found no programs for children 13 and older in the area. A brochure she sent out to friends eventually reached officials at Mental Health and Mental Retardation of Tarrant County, who asked her to speak to a parent and professional group about her ideas. Then a friend donated seed money for the project.

"I took that as the Lord saying, 'Go for it,'" Hollingsworth said.

She applied for nonprofit status in January and formed a board of directors.

Community members soon pitched in. The Hurst-Euless-Bedford Rotary Club gave a \$2,000 grant, and a member donated the tennis table. MHMR made the Clubhouse a contract provider, which means the agency will provide referrals and subsidize the fees for qualified families. The Hurst-Euless-Bedford school district transports children from their schools in the district to the Clubhouse for no fee.

A crew of about 20 volunteers painted and prepared the building. A Rotary Club member painted a Bible verse in purple paint at the top of the cafe's walls: "...

exceedingly, abundantly above all we ask or think."

Hollingsworth said the verse means two things. First, God will deliver exceedingly and abundantly.

The second meaning applies to the children.

"They're going to grow," Hollingsworth said. "They're going ... a step further in their development." © Copyright 2006 The Fort Worth Star-Telegram

www.theclubhouse.org