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FAIRPORT POST NEWS

WEEK OF MARCH 9-15, 2006

notable names

Woodard named to dean's list

An Woodard, son of Lynn and William Woodard of Fairport, has named to the dean's list for the fall semester at SUNY at Plattsburgh. A major and a computer science major, he earned a 3.8 grade-point average. He is a graduate of Fairport High School.

Three students achieve dean's list

Following students named to the dean's list for the fall semester at SUNY at Plattsburgh are: Lauren MacDonnell, a senior majoring in broadcast journalism, and as Sampson, a senior majoring in broadcast journalism.

Three Green names honor students

Following students named to the dean's list for the fall semester at Bowdoin College are: L. Herrera of Acon and Casey L. Perry of Wood Lane.

Three achieve honors

Gaetan Fleche of Fairport has been named to the dean's list for the fall 2005 semester at Providence College. Fleche is a member of Phi Kappa Phi.

Three on dean's list

Michael Eisenhardt, a 2004 graduate of High School, has been placed on the dean's list for the fall 2005 semester at the University of Vermont. Already certified elementary/special education, he is enrolled in the master's degree program for mental education.

Eisenhardt, a 2005 graduate of High School, has been placed on the dean's list for the fall 2005 semester at the University of Vermont. She is participating in the year master's program physician assistant student.

Got a PEOPLE tip? We want your table names.

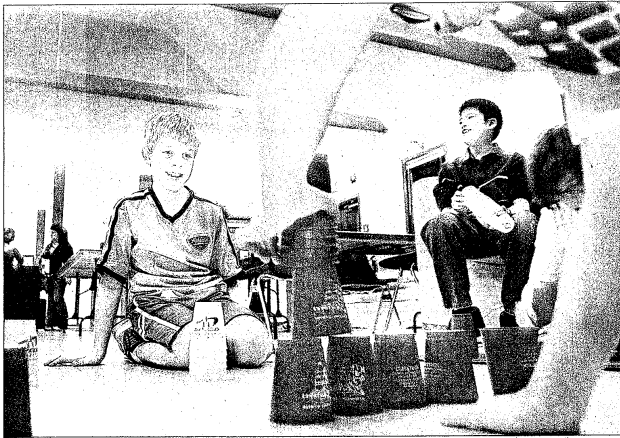
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Ben Scott, 11, watches as Alex Horsfall, 12, stacks cups during an activity night at the Fairport Lions Den Teen Center.

Teen center takes a NEW DIRECTION

Perinton wants to dump the perceived bad rap and start fresh, hoping to attract teens of all ages and social groups

By BENJAMIN WAITS
Message Post Staff

There's no way to hide it: the Lions Den Teen Center in Fairport has a reputation. Adults are often circumspect about it.

"Unfortunately, I think it's gotten an image that isn't always a positive image," said Tim Slesz, a teacher at Johanna Perinton and a member of one of the teen center's new advisory committees. "I think that the teen center has always been open to anyone who wants to go there, but only a certain group of teens have been going there."

He said he didn't want to talk about who makes up that certain group. Jayne LaFay, a member of the town's recreation committee and another new adviser for the teen center, described them as "teens with problems."

"The reason I'm on the committee for the teen center is to help make the community aware that it is a nice place for all children to go, not just a place for teens with problems to go," she said. "In the past it's gotten a pretty bad rap."

If you ask kids who used to go to the teen center, they'll get straight to the point.

"It's where all the bad crowd hung out," said Mike Nutting, a high school sophomore who is on a new youth advisory group for the center. "I wasn't there too much. But I'd been a few times and I thought it needed a change."

The bad crowd, he said, means "kids who smoke or drink." Ashley Brennan, another high school student and member of the new advisory committee, agrees with that assessment. She said she'd only been to the teen center "like once," about two years ago, and that was enough.

"They had a lot of conflicts and a lot of drugs and things were being used there," she said. "I'd seen it first hand."

That reputation — the place where troubled or "bad" kids hang out — has been around for much of its recent history.

But not all of it. There was a time, about five years ago, when leaders from across the community were praising the center as a place that kept even the most troubled kids — especially the most troubled kids — out of trouble.

Today the town's Recreation and Parks Department is making a full-blown effort to restore that kind of confidence, creating new advisory committees, new policies and reaching out to a new group of kids.

"I guarantee it's going to be quite successful," LaFay said. "We have a buy-in from the community leaders and the school leaders. It's going to be a great place for kids."

That's a common sentiment and confidence is high. Yet, the new push isn't to repeat what made the teen center successful back then. If anything, it's moving in the opposite direction.



Kids at the Lions Den Teen Center in Fairport play a cup-stacking game. There is a new focus on younger kids at the center.

The teen center was started in 1945, according to Jim Donahue, director of Perinton's Recreation and Parks Department. Back then, it was called "Melody Night Nook," and held concerts for teenagers on Friday and Saturday nights. In the 1960s, it was renamed "Tiger N Tow," but served much the same purpose. In 1990, after the Fairport Lions Club revitalized the structure, it was renamed the Lions Den Teen Center, its current incarnation.

Like all long-standing institutions, it had its high and low points, but by then the low had been fixed in the minds of much of the community.

Yet in 2001, town Supervisor Jim Smith and Fairport schools Superintendent Bill Cala said people from across the community were telling them the same thing: Kids who might otherwise be causing trouble don't when they're at the teen center.

Fairport Police Officer Jack Lisena said exactly that to the *Perinton-Fairport Post*. "I think it is definitely a good place for them," he said. He wanted the teen center's hours expanded.

Jeremy Argo, 18, said at the time, "If I wasn't here, I'd usually be getting into trouble, with like the police and stuff. But here it's like a second home that keeps me out of trouble."

They all credited one person with the center's turnaround: Karen Musson, a Perinton Recreation Center employee who was put in charge of the center after a host of short-term directors had come and gone. She displayed staying power and more — she managed to reach the kids most in need.

"Through Karen's efforts, she's really helped broaden the scope of the program to create a greater interest in what's going on over there," said Ken Zeller, who was director of the Recreation and Parks Department at the time.

Some parents were also impressed. "She helped my son out tremendously," said parent Bart C. Hollings. "He was kind of wild for a while (then) Karen got him involved at the teen center and he did a complete turnaround."

Many kids called Musson "Mom" and even those who didn't treated her like one. "Everyone's like a family here," said Lisa Bremer, a 16-year-old teen center attendee back then.

Minerva DeLand Principal Pat Moriarty had observed the dynamic, too. "Karen does a tremendous job with those kids. I think that's why attendance has improved," he said. "Kids frequently talked about Karen being an important person in their life, and when you talk about adult role models being important, Karen was one of their role models."

See TEEN CENTER, 3D

Fairport teen center takes a new direction

► **TEEN CENTER**, from page 1B

The key, for Musson, was to genuinely appreciate the kids for who they were while setting strict boundaries. They couldn't smoke or use drugs while on the grounds, but they didn't have to pretend they wouldn't off grounds, either. They could listen to their music. They could dance. They could, with permission, put up their own graffiti on the walls. It became a reward for doing something good or for a band who played there on Friday nights.

Eventually, the east side of the building was covered floor to ceiling with signs, symbols and sketches — a tapestry of youth.

The program was always supervised but often unstructured. Attendance quadrupled from just a few years before.

Even so, some adults were looking at it askance. It was noisy, the kids were loud and they expressed themselves. If they weren't "bad kids," they didn't pretend to be "good kids" either. Many adults were uncomfortable with the frankness of the program, even some of the community leaders who praised Musson publicly were saying privately, and off the record, that they didn't like the direct approach it was taking.

It was positive that teenagers like Adam Spicola, 15, credited Musson with helping him quit drugs ("we talked about it — and she got me out of it," he said), but that meant she was having frank and open conversations with teenagers about their drug use. Was that appropriate?

Yes, it was positive that she'd help teenage girls dump their boyfriends when they became pushy or abusive — but didn't that also mean she was talking about sex to teenagers? Yes, many of these children had troubled — even abusive — homes, but was it right for Musson to discuss it with them? Some wondered among themselves, if this was something they were comfortable with.

By mid-2002, it was all over. The graffiti on the walls had been painted over and replaced with Disney characters.

The town of Perinton and Musson have never agreed on exactly what happened: the town says she resigned and files a letter of resignation to back that up. She said she was forced out after she refused to stop advocating for "her" kids. They do agree, though, about what the area of disagreement was. Musson was going to graduate school to become a certified counselor. She wanted to take helping these kids to the next level.

The town said they couldn't be part of that. Perinton doesn't run a social-services department, and the liability issues of having an employee formally counsel kids while on their time would be enormous. They couldn't do it.

Whatever exactly happened, it happened fast. Musson was gone and the symbols of her time there were taken down or painted over. There would be no more discussions about sex, drugs or family problems. Anecdotally that's when drug use at the center actually began to increase and smoking made a comeback, but just how bad the problem was is unclear. Police Chief Kirk Parsons said his department never received any complaints about kids drinking or doing drugs in the teen center itself.

"We have had complaints on occasion that there has been some drinking and drug use outside the teen center, in the surrounding park area," he said. "But I don't have firsthand knowledge if the (teen center's) reputation is accurate."

However accurate, the teen center was back to its bad reputation. And it limped along that way for years. That's over, town officials say.

A month ago, at a small ceremony, Minerva DeLand art teacher Liz Smith helped members of the ninth-grade art club

put a new decoration on the wall, over where the graffiti had been.

It was tapestry. A "fairy-tale style tree" with a focus on the "developmental assets" — a group of 40 positive character traits that the school district and community are trying to make sure kids have. Each leaf of the tree has a different asset written on it, such as caring, thoughtful, safety and responsible.

Members are proud of it, and of the fact that it's now displayed at the teen center. "We had a great teacher," said freshman Peter Shiptan.

Student E. Thomas O'Hehir said, "I like the idea of creating a new environment for the teen center because the teens might feel more at home if they see something done by their peers."

Adults at the center say they like it because of its unambiguously positive message.

Asked about the old wall versus the new, Jim Donahue, Perinton director of recreation and parks, said, "We have the teens designing it but now they're aware of how the facility is to be used. It's not just teens, it's a community building, and some of (what was up previously) wasn't appropriate for that. Now we have direction and supervision."

That embodies the town's new approach to the teen center. They've created several new committees of adults and youths to provide input, to generate ideas that will make kids feel welcome. They say they intend to genuinely listen to what the kids have to say.

"I think having kids involved in the decision-making will be a good thing," said Slisz. "After all, it's a facility for the kids. If

we as adults make decisions that are the best decisions for kids, while also letting kids have input, it can only be a good thing."

At the same time, the kids on the committees were drawn from the school district's Leadership Asset Program and Chemical Prevention Advisory Council — two organizations that kids who have trouble with authority aren't on. Members often stress their deference to adults.

Debra Tandoi, who heads the school district's asset program, admitted that maybe they're getting a limited sampling of kids so far — kids who are already right where the adults in their lives want them to be. But, she said, that doesn't mean these kids shouldn't be part of it. It just means that the adults at the teen center need to work harder to be more inclusive.

"I think that's the adults' responsibility that, as it progresses, if we're missing an important link in the community that we do a further outreach to them to get them involved," Tandoi said. "I think we're doing a great job trying to get everybody involved."

The things that excite the adults about the new, revitalized teen center are a far cry from the real talk about real troubles that happened during the teen center's heyday under Musson.

That's not an oversight, town officials say — that's the point. The teen center was never meant to be associated with troubled kids. It's supposed to be a place where all kids feel welcome.

"We really want to welcome all teens to the teen center, so we're trying to find a way to

attract all teens," said Julie Eble, who became the teen program coordinator for Perinton Recreation last November. "The more involved that they are with the changes we're making the more they'll want to come and bring their friends."

"The point was always to make a safe, fun place for teens," said Diane Riesenberger, a senior recreation supervisor with Perinton Recreation. "Now we're really making a commitment to do that."

There will be a push for more student decorations, more trips to fun places, more programs, times to do homework, and especially an effort to get younger teens, closer to 10, 11 or 12 than 16 or 18, coming.

Riesenberger describes what they're going for as a "coffeeshop feel." They want to create a kind of place where any kid can walk in off the street and feel welcome.

Yet one change is to eliminate the "drop-in" program in which any teenager could stop by whenever they want. Now teens who visit must be registered by their parents. The facility will also be reserved at specific age groups.

The result has been a large drop in attendance, Riesenberger admits.

Saturday night, for example, was once a big one for the teen center. Sometimes hundreds of teens would drop by. Now, Saturday night is for sixth-, seventh- and eighth-graders, according to Tina Harris, who supervises there, and not for older kids. The result has been a teen center, so almost empty on Saturday

nights these last few months.

Less attendance is to be expected, Riesenberger said. After all, the registration requirement just started. It will take teens, and parents, she said, time to adjust to the new system and the new outlook and look.

"We knew it would be little steps," she said. "Numbers are down because many of the kids who were attracted there previously — the old, 'bad' crowd — are no longer interested."

"It's lowered greatly," he said. Brennan, too, thinks that while the new teen center is "more welcoming," some of her peers will no longer be interested. "Some people will probably hang out there and some will probably go other places," she said. She's not sure where that will be. Neither are police.

"We have over 40 kids come in for a cup-stacking game on Wednesday during break," Riesenberger said. "Saturday night we usually haven't been having any kids, but we got some for game night this past Saturday — hopefully the word is getting out."

The recently deceased Fairport High School graduate Shawn Beach had been a teen center regular, and after his memorial service a group of teens went to the teen center to talk about him over pizza.

"That's what the teen center should be," Riesenberger said. "Right now it's a waiting game to see if the new approach to the teen center will attract more students — from every crowd — while making parents feel comfortable."

Parsons said that the town "is looking to do the right thing. I stand behind what they're doing." But, he admitted, "I do not have a sense of how this is going to play out."

"Being the parent of two small children, I want it to be a place where they'll feel comfortable to go," LaFay said. "I want to spread the word that there's going to be a transformation. It's going to be a phenomenal place."

"We know we're on the right track," said Riesenberger. Benjamin Wachs can be reached at (585) 381-3304. Ext. 459 or bwachs@perintonpapers.com.

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