

COMMENTARY



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A place where kids can be real

It's true a kid can get in trouble hanging out at the mall, but he also can get himself rescued there.

And rescue is not too strong a word.

Kids in middle school and high school have a lot on their plates, even when they come from well-adjusted, supportive families. Some feel like they are hanging on by their nails in a storm.

It can get lonely. There are social stressors, mental health issues, matters of sexual orientation to process, pressure to perform at school and on the playing field. Family trouble like divorce or a parent's addiction adds to the commotion. For a lot kids, money is an issue. Some have too much, others not nearly enough to cover the basics.

Enter the Teen Center at Oxford Valley Mall in Middletown. It is an inconspicuous cluster of sitting rooms and a kitchenette on the Penney's side of the mall adjacent to the mall loading docks. It's run by Bucks County Family Service Association. It is where kids can congregate to talk, draw, write poetry and sometimes just goof off — most times, just goof off.

The mall does not promote it, but it should.

Over the years, I've been invited to come have a look at the center because it does some pretty impressive work with kids there. I always have declined. Teenagers scare the h@#\$ out of me. They are loud and moody and prone to drama and have the bad habit of saying whatever they are thinking. My own kids, now grown, were hard enough on my constitution. No way do I go out of my way to hang around with strangers' teens.

But last week, I was feeling brave.

Eliminating teenagers from my life is my loss, according to social workers Marie Turko, Soo Sung and Craig Davis Marsters. Marie coordinates the Teen Center and has been there just a couple of years. Soo has been a counselor at the Teen Center nine years and works at the Lenape Crisis Center. Craig, whom I didn't get to meet on the day I visited, has been at the center 13 years.

Marie and Soo get a kick out of being around high-schoolers. They like the kids' energy and their lack of filter. OK, their music stinks, but not all of it. "They are so open-minded and willing to try new things," says Soo, who's working on a doctorate in developmental psychology.

Some teens wander into the center because they get tired of walking the mall, where they are shooed by security guards who don't let them congregate in noisy numbers. Other kids come to the center looking for a life raft, not a party.

The latter come to the center for a week or two or a month, and eventually call a counselor aside to talk. On occasion, a teen has confided she's in crisis and that's when grown-ups circled the wagons to intervene. It's rare that happens, but it does.

If you have questions about the center, call the Family Service Association at 215-757-6916 ext. 214 or visit the website at www.fsabc.org.

Soo said her toughest challenge is running into a kid who confides he's homeless. One boy had been living in a tent city in Bristol Township for several months. Others live on a couch at a friend's house. Some sleep in friends' cars.

"Very hard not to worry," Soo said. The only shelter for homeless teens requires that parents be involved. The trouble is that some kids are escaping parents, or they have been abandoned. Counselors do what they can to advise such a boy or girl and connect him or her to resources.

This winter it was not uncommon for as many as 90 teenagers to sign in at the center. They come and go and come back again during the course of the evening.

Mike, 14, was among the first to sign in on Friday after school last week. His mom dropped him off. He is a whirlwind — a lot of boy with lots on his mind. He dyes his hair black, paints his nails and wears a little eye makeup. At the tech school, he's torn between pursuing cosmetology and diesel mechanics. If life were perfect, he'd be in a dance studio all day. Pulsing electronic music with strobe lights, he says. Now, that would be cool.

He came here the first time because he heard there were free snacks. He stayed because it was safe and welcoming. And some nights a lot of fun.

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It's a place for kids to be themselves if they agree to the rules. No drugs, no alcohol, no smoking. Most important, no show of disrespect for anyone in the room. The adults who run it "are aware," Marie says. It means kids feel secure.

"This is like a fireplace," says Pennsbury student Elias, who enjoys the conversation here. He prides himself on considering all sides. "A fireplace. We're the embers." Sometimes the place is crackling hot with the kids' energy. Sometimes, it's just cozy. Always he feels welcomed, he said.

Neshaminy junior Colleen is a pretty girl with poker straight hair

and flashing dark eyes. She has been coming here since seventh grade when her mom was "having some problems." She kept coming after her mother died. This place and the adults who run it provided respite from the depression that threatened to consume her. She talked a lot with Soo back then. Now, she comes to see who is around, to laugh, to sit in on a group talk, the subject of which is usually suggested by counselors.

"Here, you'll find the most real people," she said.

Real can make you an outsider at school where "being a clone" is safer. But, real is welcome at the Teen Center, encouraged even. That doesn't fix problems, but it makes them the tiniest bit easier to navigate. That's important.

Kate Fratti's column appears on Monday, Wednesday and Friday.