

SOUTHTOWN STAR



The Southland is filled with interesting people with unique tales to tell. We tell their stories.



A community effort: Priscilla Steinmetz (foreground) is the founder of the Bridge Teen Center in Orland Park. | BRETT ROSEMAN - SUN-TIMES MEDIA

Steinmetz designs center for teens

BY GINGER BRASHINGER

Correspondent

Walking into the Bridge Teen Center in Orland Park is a lot like coming home — warm, inviting and safe.

That's exactly what Priscilla Steinmetz had in mind when the center was still a dream.

Steinmetz said the center, which opened less than a year ago, is the result of years of planning, hard work, community outreach and faith.

"This is a God story," Steinmetz, of Frankfort, said.

Five years ago, after a meeting of community leaders concerned about the needs of the area's youth, Steinmetz took the request for help seriously.

"I believe it's my responsibility whenever anyone asks me for help to say, 'What can I do?'" she said.

Steinmetz got right to work, along with her husband, Rob, whom she credits with "doing everything" at the nonprofit center at 15555 S. 71st Court. He began by putting a organization together and he now does anything from

construction to marketing. Priscilla tackled the rest.

The comfy furniture, warm colors, laptop bar, game tables, culinary center and multi-purpose area that accommodates classes in everything from self-defense to sewing were all designed with teens in mind.

But it was never about appearances. "I looked at my past and the things I struggled with as a teen and how I was floundering at times," Steinmetz said about her issues with an eating disorder as a teenager. Finding her way to a cure ultimately inspired her vision for the Bridge.

"For me, my journey was holistic," Steinmetz said, noting that she had to make mental, physical, emotional and spiritual changes to overcome her health issues.

Before opening the center, she already had invested 17 years in working with teens. Steinmetz said she knew the same connections that had helped her — what the Bridge calls "buckets" — could be used to create a safe, productive environment for young people.

That meant she had to make a

decision to leave her "very secure position" as a youth minister at Trinity Lutheran Church in Tinley Park, a ministry she helped grow from a handful of students to more than 400 young people at its peak.

But, after surveying hundreds of students to find out what kind of facility they would actually go to on a regular basis, Steinmetz said knew she had to do it.

In the survey, "91 percent of the kids said yes, they want a place to go. They want a place to hang out for free that wasn't 'cheesy,'" Steinmetz said. "We really saw the need was there."

Despite the fact that there were no funds, the Bridge opened in May and now boasts a group of trained volunteers, a small but dedicated paid staff and 200 student memberships.

The Steinmetzes gratefully acknowledge that the Bridge is the result of a community effort. A number of skilled workers have donated their time, area businesses have donated materials and volunteers help with everything from cleaning windows to tutoring students and running workshops.

"It's by the community, for the community," Steinmetz said.

Other communities want one, too. The center has had calls from as far away as New York and as close as downstate Illinois, asking for help in creating a place like the Bridge.

"There's nothing else like this providing free programs for teens in a holistic way," Priscilla said, noting that she definitely sees "satellite" Bridge centers in the future.

For now, the Steinmetzes have to deal with the growing needs of the center they have.

With expansion plans to the building next door, the needs will be even greater.

The Bridge desperately needs a "Bridge Bus," furniture and electronics equipment, including laptops, not to mention everyday needs including toilet paper and disinfectant wipes, she said.

Still, Steinmetz's view remains that it's "a God thing."

"For us, it's walkin' by faith," she said. "It's what we need to do."

More information about the Bridge is at www.thebridgeteen-center.org or (708) 466-8080.

NEIGHBORHOODSTAR

A GUIDE TO YOUR
COMMUNITY'S NEWS

GET UP AND GO!

Worth
getting
out of the
house for
today ...



Concert Band: The Moraine Valley Community College Concert Band will perform its "Dances, Portraits and Folk Songs" concert at 7:30 p.m. in the Dorothy Menker Theater at the school, 9000 College Parkway, Palos Hills. General admission is \$12, or \$10 for seniors and students. Information: (708) 974-5500.

Culinary Demonstration: The Bridge Teen Center will host a free culinary demonstration for students in seventh through 12th grades at 4:30 p.m. at 15555 S. 71st Court, Orland Park. Chef Maribel Alchin will teach students how to make lasagna. Registration is required and space is limited. Information: (708) 532-0500.

Riviera Trip: Photographer Sara Drower will host "A Trip Down the Riviera" at 11 a.m. at Tinley Park Public Library, 7851 Timber Drive. Drower will discuss and show photos of France, Monaco, Italy and more. Registration is required. Information: (708) 532-0160, Ext. 3.

Lego Program: Steger-South Chicago Heights Public Library, 54 E. 31st St., Steger, will offer its "L'go at the L'ibrary" program for children in kindergarten through fifth grade at 3:30 p.m. Students can create projects with other Lego enthusiasts. Information: (708) 755-5040.