

Couple looks to build bridges

TINLEY PARK AREA Teen center in the works

BY ELISABETH KILPATRICK
STAFF WRITER

When Jay Galbreath and his friends hang out, chances are good they'll wind up aimlessly driving around town.

"A lot of times, we don't have anything to do," said Galbreath, 19, of Tinley Park.

Priscilla Steinmetz has been hearing that same line from teens for more than a decade. Now, the former youth minister and her husband, Rob, are preparing to launch a project they think will help.

It's called The Bridge Teen Center, a place for students to hang out, take art classes, learn to cook or get advice from a mentor. To Priscilla Steinmetz, it's the answer to the growing problem of suburban teens with nowhere to go and no one to turn to after school or on weekends.

"The school can't do everything; the church can't do everything. Families are struggling now with time and economics," she said. "We need to do something in our community to give back to our young people."

'Pied Piper of teens'

Steinmetz thinks she's in a unique position to do just that. She's spent 17 years working with teens, eight of them as director of youth programs at Trinity Lutheran Church in Tinley Park.

Along the way, Steinmetz has developed something of a magic touch with her young students. At Trinity Lutheran, she took a struggling youth group of 12 teenagers and built it up to more than 400.

"I've been called the Pied Piper of teens," she said with a laugh.

"Some people were just born to do certain things," Rob Steinmetz said. "Michael Jordan was born to play basketball, and Priscilla was born to work with teenagers."

Priscilla Steinmetz is clearly beloved among her old students, like Galbreath, who is heading to college soon but still meets her regularly for coffee or just to talk.

"You're not the mom or dad, so there's not the scare factor there," he told her over the table at Starbucks last week.

Emily Chathas, 16, said Steinmetz has helped her grow more confident and learn how to meet new people.

"She's pretty much a godsend to me," the Lincoln-Way North High School junior said.

While working with her students, Steinmetz has met teens with every type of issue imaginable: eating disorders, alcohol and drug problems, self-injury, dating violence. Those problems are more prevalent than people think, she said.

"I just had a young girl Facebook me the other day ... and she was so excited because she hadn't thrown up in 60 days," said Steinmetz, who also battled bulimia as a teen. "This is happening, and if you think it's not, your head is in the sand."

The solution, Steinmetz said, is to keep teens engaged, not just "busy."

"I get so worked up about that phrase, because it's saying you're not valuing a teen's life and time," she said. "We don't give young people enough opportunities to really look and say, 'What am I interested in?'"

A firm foundation

The first plans for The Bridge date back to 2005, when Priscilla Steinmetz broached the idea of a center to Rob. With her experience working with teens and his background in nonprofit marketing, the two thought they could succeed where other centers have failed.

"People think, 3½ years, wow, that's a long time to be working on something, but we want to be very purposeful in what we do and do it right," Priscilla Steinmetz said.



Rob and Priscilla Steinmetz

The Bridge was incorporated as a nonprofit organization in 2005, and the couple spent the next three years assembling a board of directors, developing a business plan and starting to raise money.

"Our goal is to raise three years of our operating budget, so that when we open, we'll have three years already ahead," Steinmetz said. "We want to lay that firm foundation to tell the community, once we're here, we're here to stay."

Plenty of research also went into the project as Steinmetz worked to figure out what would draw teens to the center. She surveyed 500 students at Tinley Park High School, where she found kids wanted to learn music production and culinary arts. Her favorite discovery, though, was how many students were interested in The Bridge.

"Ninety-one percent of them said they would come to a place like this," she said proudly.

This spring, Steinmetz left her job as a youth minister to concentrate on The Bridge full time. The organization's next steps are to find a location, either in the Tinley Park or Orland Park area, and to raise enough money to open. With enough support from the community, the center could open by this fall, Steinmetz said.

That comes as good news to

GET INVOLVED

What: The Bridge Teen Center is planning two open houses this week to tell potential volunteers and donors more about the project.

When: Thursday, 7 to 8:30 p.m.; Saturday, 10 to 11:30 a.m.

Where: Tinley Park High School, 6111 175th St., Tinley Park

Details: People ages 21 and older are welcome to attend. Guests are asked to RSVP in advance. Information on The Bridge is available by contacting bridgeteencenter@aol.com or (708) 466-8080.

Web site: www.thebridge-teencenter.org

both community leaders and teens, who say places like the mall and the movies aren't enough.

"They used to have youth centers when I was a kid. ... There's absolutely a need for any type of program like this," Lincoln-Way School District 210 Supt. Lawrence Wyllie said.

As for Priscilla Steinmetz's former students, they say if anyone can pull off a place like this, it's her.

"Every time I see Priscilla, she's welcoming people," said Matt Jenill, 15, of Tinley Park. "I think she'll be really good at this."

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