A BRIDGE NOT TOO FAR

Orland’s teen center plans major expansion

By Tim Hadac • Staff reporter

A bridge built five years ago in Orland Park is about to double in size.

The Bridge Teen Center, an award-winning community center that provides after-school activities for youths in 7th-12th grades, is on the cusp of a major expansion at its home at 15555 S. 71st Court.

Village construction permits are expected soon, and if financial donors step forward, the expansion could be accomplished by year’s end. If not, the project could take a year, said Bridge director Priscilla Steinmetz, who co-founded the not-for-profit with her husband, Rob, in 2010.

“It’s always about the almighty dollar,” she laughed during a recent interview. “We receive no state or federal funding, so we rely on the generosity of foundations, our corporate partners, local churches, and individual donors and volunteers.”

The expansion should enable The Bridge to boost its service capacity from 178 to 453 people at a time.

Since its founding, the teen center has served roughly 3,300 teens mostly from the Orland Park area, but from as far away as Naperville and Joliet. It gets as many as 250 teenager visits a week for its many programs in such diverse areas as music and the arts, mind/body health, community service and more.

This summer, The Bridge will offer as many as 105 different programs for young people, all delivered free of charge.

“We extend our hours in the summer, because kids have more free time,” Steinmetz said. “We have our programs where you have to sign up ahead of time due to limited space, like guitar lessons, but we have an increasing number of fun events that do not require pre-registration.”

Small idea, big result

The Bridge started as a small idea that came out of a luncheon that Steinmetz attended, at which a local school superintendent challenged the community.

“He said, ‘Hey, we need your help,’ and he said, ‘There are a lot of afterschool programs for kids in the city, but you never hear about them out here in the suburbs,’” she said.

So she gave it a bit more thought and then “went home and said, ‘Hon, I have an idea. I know a lot of men cringe when they hear that from their wives, but really, that’s how things happen sometimes,’” she added with a laugh.

In addition to finding and acquiring a location, Steinmetz and her crew asked kids themselves what they wanted.

“We did focus groups and online surveys to find out what they wanted,” she said. “They told us they wanted a place where they could just be themselves and hang out, yet at the same time a place where they could explore and discover life.”

That fairly describes The Bridge today, where a boy or girl can just go and sip a root beer float while sharing a laugh with others—or learn a wide range of things like needlepoint, songwriting, canoeing, horseback riding or dozens of other things that no school offers.

“They do a lot of unique things at The Bridge,” said Orland Park Mayor Daniel McLaughlin, a longtime fan of the center. “This is an important place that gives something special to kids who maybe have little to nothing to do after school. Some kids aren’t on sports. Not everyone plays football or baseball or volleyball.”

The work of The Bridge may also help prevent crime, at least indirectly. Research shows that youths make poor life choices, including alcohol and drug abuse, between 3 and 6 p.m., when they are often without adult supervision.

In addition to monetary donations, the upcoming expansion will need donations of skilled labor from tradesmen and others, as well as donations of construction materials, furnishings and more.

Those interesting in learning more are advised to visit thebridgecenter.org online.

Friday Night Live concerts are a popular event at The Bridge, which has accepted an invitation from the village of Orland Park to run the battle of the bands contest at this year’s Taste of Orland.

Both educational and interactive games just for fun have been a staple at the Bridge Teen Center in Orland Park since its doors opened in 2010. The culinary arts are explored by teens in the kitchen at The Bridge.