

Renovated Valley Youth Center offers much for community

By Genevieve Shops
Staff Writer

Children in Lower Moreland and Bryn Athyn now have a home away from home at The Valley Youth Center, which showed off its new look Oct. 22 after undergoing about \$30,000 worth of renovations.

"We had so much traffic in the past few years the carpet was threadbare," said youth center President Mike Bellomo. "The place was in disrepair."

The 2,100-square-foot center features new carpets and furniture, including tables, chairs and a plush leather couch in the lounge area as well as a new kitchen area, a pool and foosball table, and a variety of arcade games.

After a somewhat rocky start, the township has really grown into the youth center, Bellomo said.

"In the very beginning it was rough going trying to get the center off the ground. We didn't get a lot of support. But then there was the Eddie Pollock incident," said Bellomo, speaking of the

1997 beating that occurred on the steps of a Philadelphia church, claiming the life of the teen. "After that, people showed a lot of interest in helping out."

The Valley Youth Center, which is dedicated to Pollock, celebrated its original opening in 1998 with Pollock's parents present for the ribbon cutting ceremony.

Since then, the center has become part of the township's hub, located in close vicinity to the library, high school, township building and fire station.

Thursday and Friday afternoons from 3 to 5 p.m., area teens can go to the center to watch television, play pool or basketball at the neighboring Red Lion Gym, listen to music and chat with friends over a snack.

"The center keeps kids off the street who otherwise might be running around at the cemetery or Wawa," Bellomo said. "It shows kids in the township that there are adults who care about what they do and how they're doing it."

Monday through Wednesday and Saturday, the center is open to community groups, which



Globe staff photo / BILL FRASER

The Valley Youth Center, located below the Huntingdon Valley Library, recently reopened its doors after a \$30,000 renovation project, which featured new carpeting and furniture.



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Valley Youth Center President Mark Bellomo talks about the donation wall at the center.

have taken full advantage of the center's cozy quarters. Residents can also utilize the space for parties and get-togethers.

"Every community group uses the center," said Lower Moreland Commissioner and youth center Vice President Denise Kuritz. "We have groups begging us to come in, but we just don't have the space."

Both Bellomo and Kuritz are looking for ways to make the center more available, but realize the impossibility of making every group happy.

Relying entirely on the help of volunteers, the majority of work falls on their shoulders, from organizing meeting schedules to event planning and last-minute runs to Sam's Club for food and decorations.

"We're both suckers for kids," Bellomo said.

"When you see the kids — the smiles on their faces, the high fives — it makes all our work worth it," Kuritz said. "They really look forward to coming here."

The laid-back atmosphere makes the center a great place for

children to feel comfortable, have fun and meet other kids their age, said Bellomo.

"Having an offering like this in the township brings a lot to the area," Kuritz said. "Not every township has a youth center."

Every year the center offers special events, including parties for Halloween and Valentine's Day, a beach party in June, a holiday party in December, an ice skating event and a third-grade open house. This year's holiday party will be held from 3 to 5 p.m. Dec. 3. Children are asked

to bring an unwrapped gift in the amount of \$5 to \$10, which will be donated to Child Abuse Prevention Efforts, in exchange for free pizza and beverages.

"We're really like a family at the youth center," Bellomo said. "Everything is so separated these days. The center helps bring people together."

The Valley Youth Center is located below the Huntingdon Valley Library, 625 Red Lion Road. Anyone interested in volunteering can contact Denise Kuritz at 215-947-7694.