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TeenPride center enjoying growth in recent months

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Assistant Director Jamie Pooler (in green) leads an activity involving ratios and proportions by making trail mix with teens Matt Simms, Jhyiar Wilfong and Olivia Simms. / Photo courtesy of TeenPride

Written by **Matt Manochio**
Special to the Daily Record

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When he became director of the teen center on Spring Street in Morristown in October, one of Dan Levitt's goals was to get more kids dropping by after school — as they've been doing for more than 20 years.

"It's been a great success," Levitt said Wednesday. "We've had quite a bit of growth."

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He said 83 kids in grades 6 to 12 regularly visited the center at various times throughout January. Now the number's up to 120.

"We've had close to 40 new kids come through our doors since January," he said. "That's encouraging."



Teens playing basketball while at TeenPride, which is based at the Morristown Salvation Army building. / Photo courtesy of TeenPride

The teen center, operated by TeenPride Inc., a Morristown-based nonprofit organization that seeks to help children from age 12 through high school graduation, only requires that children who stop by be enrolled in school.

"There is no economic guideline or anything like that," Levitt said. "We have kids come from across the spectrum."

Levitt, who in October was joined by Jamie Pooler, the center's new assistant director, said most of the kids come from Morristown, Morris Township and Morris Plains, but not exclusively. He said there generally between 300 to 400 visits a month by the kids.

"We have some kids who come 15 to 18 times a month," he said.

Although TeenPride has been around for two decades, Levitt said he wasn't familiar with it until recently.

"I became aware of it a few weeks before I started," he said. "There are a lot of options out there for kids, and I'm glad we're one of the good ones."

A place to feel safe

TeenPride doesn't just offer after-school activities, it has counseling services for the children, too.

"We have homework help available every day after school," he said.

The kids can play football, soccer, take guitar lessons, and there's also a gymnasium and karaoke, among other attractions.

"It's a safe place where kids can come, where they can feel safe," he said. "And the kids who come here, there's no charge."

Kathleen Hyland, a Morris Township resident and one of the co-founders of TeenPride, said she's pleased with the two new directors.

"They're fabulous. They're very professional," she said. "Jamie lives in the community, and she knows so many kids in the area. She

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has wonderful contact, and she has great skills with the kids.”

TeenPride operates on funding primarily from Morristown and Morris Township, along with grants and donations.

Levitt said the teen center hosts a Thanksgiving dinner for the kids, and they’ve taken the children on trips to other teen centers. Summertime usually includes a weeklong trip to a sleepover camp in upstate New York.

“We try to make it comfortable for the kids,” Levitt said of the center. “If you don’t make the kids a part of the programming ... you’re not going to succeed. Since they’re not paying and they’re not required to be here, they’d be somewhere else.”

The center is open Monday through Saturday, with hours from 2:30 to 9:30 p.m. on most nights. It’s located at 95 Spring St., where TeenPride leases space for the center from the Morristown Salvation Army.

Staff members are all adults, have undergone criminal background checks and know first aid and CPR.

“All the staff here are very competent people,” Levitt said.

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