

# A clean, well-lighted place for kids

By TOM LONG

Sentinel Staff Writer

**BOULDER CREEK** — It's 4:30 on a Tuesday afternoon and three teen-age boys are standing in the rain out on the sidewalk in front of an old building in downtown Boulder Creek. The temperature is just above freezing, yet the three are shivering and joking and clowning around in the windy drizzle.

Inside the building three of the adult directors of the Valley Youth Center are sitting on plain wooden chairs on a plain wooden floor in a large empty room. In the next few weeks, this room and a few others connected to it will be transformed into something that kids in the San Lorenzo Valley have been wanting for a long time — a safe place to hang out. And talk. And keep warm.

"For at least 10 years, various groups in the valley have tried to put together a center and it never got off the ground," says Gene Braunhut of Ben Lomond.

As a result, the Valley has been filled with kids who were all revved up with no place to go. Like these kids outside the door, who may or may not even realize that in a few weeks they will be able to come in and warm up in the building they're hanging out in front of.

"A lot of these kids that are floating around hardly have homes," says Megan Braunhut. "There's a lot of frightened kids out there."

There have been a lot of kids getting in trouble out in the valley, too, getting messed up on drugs and alcohol and finally ending up in juvenile hall.

"This is a rural area. There isn't much for kids to do," says Gene.

"The nearest recreation centers are the bowling alley in Felton and the skating rink in Scotts Valley, and that's a long ways to go for kids who don't have a vehicle," says Sunshine Johnson.

The fact that they've been getting into trouble may eventually help the kids in the valley stay out of trouble. That's because most of the center's funding has come from the state Office of Criminal Justice Planning, which wants to see if such a center can help stem the rising rate of crime and drug use among the area's youth.

The center has also received grants from County Health Services and the Greater Santa Cruz Community Foundation. And now its directors — adults and teens from Boulder Creek, Ben Lomond and Felton — are transforming the old building in central Boulder Creek, called Mac's 100-year-old Place, into a bonafide youth center.

There will be pool and ping-pong tables, arcade games and a television, and sports programs organized through the Boulder Creek Recreation Center. But all won't be fun and games: a study center will be open and a room in the back will be used for counseling kids and support-group meetings.

The atmosphere will be decidedly, and purposely, drug-free.

"The statement of our purpose has always been to provide an environment that is alcohol and drug free, where kids can enjoy themselves," says Gene.

Any kid will be welcomed to the center, which will be staffed by volunteer adults, as long as they are clean of drugs and alcohol. Even if they've used before and are trying to stay straight.

"One of the biggest obstacles for kids who have used drugs and are clean is finding a whole new set of friends and a place where there are no pressures," says Gene. "Hopefully we'll provide a place where these kids can establish new groups and become the core of drug- and alcohol-free youth in the valley."

The center has specific goals it would like to achieve. In its first year of operation it would like to keep the juvenile crime rate from climbing as it has every year in recent memory. In its second year a 10 percent reduction in the rate is looked for, and then another 10 percent reduction the next year.

In the meantime, more pragmatic matters must be attended to. The directors are looking for donations of furniture and,

mainly, donations of time and energy toward fixing the place up and then staffing it. They also wouldn't mind if somebody wanted to donate a computer to the study center. The center's office is in the Valley Resource Center in Ben Lomond, and anyone wanting to help out can call 336-5651.

Eventually, they hope, the center will be open seven days a week. If all goes as planned, an Open House will be held at

the center on Jan. 23, and counseling sessions with kids will begin even before then.

"One of the most common things we heard when we were planning this is that kids just want a place to go when it rains or when something's wrong at home," says Johnson.

"A kid needs a place to come and talk with a person who understands," Gene adds.



Bill Lovejoy/Sentinel

Jason Savage and Stephanie Butler wash windows at the Boulder Creek young people's center.