

MILESTONE

Teen center celebrates 12 years

Director hopes to expand services

By **SAMANTHA CLARK**

newsroom@santacruzsentinel.com

SANTA CRUZ — The Santa Cruz Teen Center celebrated its 12th anniversary this month, becoming the age of its youngest youth it serves.

In December 2001, after more than five years of community discussion and planning by the Parks and Recreation Department, the teen center opened its doors to fill the void of the lack of programs for the 12- to 18-year-old age group.

But in 2009, the center lost city funding and had to move out of its 3,800-square-foot Laurel Street space to its current 1,300-square-foot location in the Loudon Nelson Community Center. The center focused on donations and grants to get up and running. But the teens came through its doors, just as they always had, said

Teen Center Director Robert Acosta.

"After we were shut down, we opened up minimally doing what we could," he said. "Minimum number of hours, stopped doing trips."

At 12 years old, the center just now is no longer having to worry about meeting its budget.

"It was all about fundraising to keep the doors open," Acosta said. "Now we're in a much better place — we're almost fully funded."

The center's annual budget is \$145,000, but it needs about \$175,000 yearly to provide the services it wants.

Acosta said the center wants to expand its hours, do outreach at middle and high schools and take the youth on more trips, such as camping and skiing.

"This is what we used to do," he said. "We want to get to that point again."

He said that the center is always looking for donations, especially for its special events, such as the Thanksgiving Dinner and

Saturday's The End party to celebrate the end of the year. The teens play games and participate in a raffle with donated prizes.

The center provides mentors and a place for teens to hang out with friends. The teens have access to computers and games. The center also puts on daily activities that could involve cooking, art or sports.

"The planned activity could be a bubble gum blowing contest or a game of knock out in the park," staff member Nick Garcia said. "We have huge 10-on-10 dodge ball games, perform plays, guitar lessons, art, homework help."

On school days, they have a "power outage" during which the teens may not use electricity-powered devices, such as TVs and game consoles. The staff encourages them to do homework and seek assistance.

The teens come from different backgrounds, from low-income homes to well-to-do homes, said Acosta.

"One of the beautiful things about our space is the diversity of teens we attract and the interactions and friendships we make possible between teens who might not otherwise have met," site supervisor Amanda Ares said. "Being able to expand our services will allow us to have a greater impact on more youth."

She said that many of the teens depend on the staff for advice that is objective and from a different perspective and from someone older.

Adolescence experts say teens should have relationships with five adults outside their immediate family, Acosta said. "We provide that."

The center has had more than 3,500 members and adds about 100 to 150 new teens each year. In 2013, about 200 teens have walked through the doors for nearly 4,500 unique visits.

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