

Town Youth Programs on the Rise

CHAPEL HILL, N.C.- Youth programs in the town are taking off, including a newly revamped Youth Council and interactive programs at the Teen Center and library.

The Youth Initiative started in 2013 with a partnership between the mayor's office and the Teen Center, which is partially run by the Parks and Recreation Department, says Samanthryn Witham, a recreation specialist in the department. The initiative has since been integrated into the Chapel Hill 2020 Plan to specifically target ages 12-18. CH2020 is a comprehensive plan that sets goals for the town over the next five years.

In 2013, the town held a series of four public meetings, for teens, parents, service providers- such as non-profit organizations that work with youth and the general public, respectively.

The data from those meetings was compiled into a report that provided a wealth of information about what should be added to teen programs and what could be done to improve the existing ones.

The Youth Initiative is now a partnership between parks and recreation, housing, planning, the library and other town departments. "We've all been offering cool programs for a long time, but we weren't all aware of what each other were offering," says Witham, commenting that it is now much easier to work cross-departmentally.

The Youth Council is described as "a mini town council in the sense that they will be meeting regularly about issues that are important to young people and making sure that town council is addressing those issues," says Witham.

Witham says that there is an application process for teens that includes a short essay and two recommendations. Officer elections will be held at the beginning of next year, but in the future, elections will be held in the spring for the following fall.

Although the Youth Council has existed in some form since 2008, there was no one to run it last year, so this year, the town is planning a resurrection. "We're attempting to increase participation and really make the youth council be for kids, by kids," says Witham.

The Youth Council isn't the only place for teens to get involved. The library also has many programs including anime and gaming programs, arts and crafts and summer camps. Stephen Ashley, youth media and information professional at the Chapel Hill Public Library, said kids was particularly enjoyed a writing workshop with young adult author Nathan Kotecki that occurred last summer.

The Street Scene Teen Center, which has been offering programs for youths for over 30 years, according to the Chapel Hill Downtown Partnership, is also extending its programming and activities.

The middle school after-school program is its primary focus and currently has 19 students registered from three different schools, says Assistant Program Manager Stephanie Davis.

The Teen Center offers dance classes for the kids on Tuesdays and Fridays. On Wednesdays, the students get to go into the Beat Making Lab, a studio full of recording and producing equipment in the center, that has been featured on the Public Broadcasting Service.

For Davis and the rest of the staff, most of whom are in their twenties, their work is all about the kids.

Davis says her favorite part is "watching their faces. You'll be hearing the parents say 'well she told me that they did this.' When they come home, and they take it back, then I know I'm doing a good job. That's what I'm here for."

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-Samanthryn Witham,
Parks and Recreation
