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Dreams + experience = Empowered young adults

Posted on August 21, 2015 by Sonoma Valley Sun

Any adult who ever held a summer or after-school job will tell you the experience put them ahead of other job-seekers later in life. Teen Services Sonoma (TSS) — usually known for its Teen Center — solves the “you need experience to get experience” conundrum.



Since opening in 1991 as El Nido (“The nest”), Teen Services Sonoma on Highway 12 in Boyes Hot Springs has provided teens a friendly environment to develop their skills, self-confidence, and potential to become productive adults.

Pictured above: Marguerite LaDue, board president, and Cristin Felso, executive director.

For many years, El Nido, short on cash but big in heart, rented a dilapidated building across the street from today’s Teen Services address. Despite repairs by local Seeds of Learning volunteers in March, 2001, and later attempts to make the building safe, it was apparent the group needed a new space. Broken windows, rodent infestation, and structural challenges simply wouldn’t do for the growing number of teens seeking support in vocational and educational programs that only El Nido provided.

Local real estate investor Art Fichtenburg is credited with inspiring the vision in 2002 for a new center, and gathering the “angels” to make it happen. One of those angels was current board member Jean Hopeman, a retired banker and volunteer grant writer. “Art said I was good at collecting money,” she says.

Fourteen months later, after a few revisions to the building plans, the new Teen Center, a made-to-order modular building assembled on site, opened its doors August 1, 2008, as Valley of the Moon Teen Center. Looking back, Hopeman recalls the “tremendous spirit of community, the collaboration, and the generosity of so many.”

Former board member and 2010 Alcalde, the late Neils Chew, affectionately described as “Sonoma’s community conscience,” created the Teen Center’s first work-training program. He hired teens to assemble piece parts for his manufacturing

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company, Dowling Miner Magnetics, which produced industrial, educational, and toy magnets. Chew's strong commitment to teens extended to writing a check to keep the center open when the board was faced with closure of their entire program during a funding crisis.

Chew was a close collaborator and friend of another local philanthropist and investment banker, the late John Randall. Randall, with members at Trinity Episcopal Church, founded Operation Youth on Sonoma's east side in 1991, providing services and activities for teens that harnessed youthful, entrepreneurial energy. Under his vision and leadership, The Shop, a drug-and alcohol-free, teen-run entertainment and art venue in Chew's warehouse on Eighth Street East, and the teen-run No Name Café at the High School where Chew delivered 30 dozen muffins weekly, were developed. Randall's long-held dream to merge Operation Youth with Valley of the Moon Teen Center to form Sonoma Valley Teen Services was fulfilled in 2010.

Devoted to helping teens with training and employment, both men were on the cutting edge in creating innovative programs. Jenny Ullman, class of 1999, fondly recalls how "Neils and John were the first adults to treat us like adults. They helped us grow up. They listened and rallied support for our ideas to make things happen. They let us lead and follow through with our plans, but they were there when we needed them, and followed our adventures."

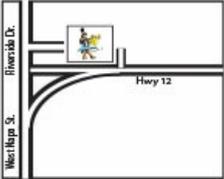
With jobs and entrepreneurship in its DNA, it's not surprising that TSS is today the largest employer of teens in Sonoma Valley with a payroll of close to 50 teens. Working with Economic Vitality Development, the Sonoma Chamber of Commerce's Young Professionals, and others, the TSS focus is to provide a fully comprehensive "Ready to Work" program. Included are initial work readiness skills, mock job interviews, on-the-job training, job placement, and coaching services — much more than most teens have before their first pay check.

Teen Services continues to run the No Name Café at the High School and also operates the Lovin' Oven, a hospitality and culinary training program launched in 2010 by entrepreneur and former board member Anea Kamehele. Utilizing the commercial kitchen at the Teen Center, they provide handmade baked goods, light catering, and event services to the public. Their chocolate chip cookies are in high demand.



A third enterprise, Operation Bicycle, teaches youth how to refurbish bicycles and provides tune-up services and bike sales to the public. Teens involved in the program can earn bikes as a result of their work. The idea grew from the former

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El Nido program Cycle Links, where youth spent at least 40 hours working on bikes that were donated to kids in need to earn the option of fixing up their own bicycle.

Sixteen years ago, Cristin Felso served as a volunteer and later as a program coordinator for both El Nido and Operation Youth. Today she serves as the TSS executive director, proud of the high impact services they deliver. “We provide 95 percent of our teens with their first paying job. It’s so rewarding to see someone’s life turn around and personal prospects expand because of a positive work experience, and many go on to college because of it.”

Felso said that studies indicate that through employment, youth gain valuable life skills and self-confidence that increase their success in high school, college and beyond.

Felso encourages community members to get involved: volunteer to help with mock interviews, “what employers want” job panels, or job coaching. “Once you engage with these kids you’re hooked,” she says. “The relevance of what we’re providing and their eagerness to respond is heartwarming.”

Board President Marguerite LaDue says this is only the beginning. “We hope to reach many more teens and engage the community to help with this critical rite of passage from adolescence to productive adulthood. It’s a win-win-win for all of us who live in Sonoma.”

For more information contact Teen Services Sonoma at 707-939-1452 or info@teenservicessonoma.org.

Remembering ‘The Shop’

“I spent some time at The Shop (teen performance space) during my senior year at SVHS (1999),” says Jennifer Ullman. “John and Niels provided the space and support, but they allowed Andy Lind and a group of teens the independence to create a venue and book bands. The teens built a stage with donated plywood and repaired some old light fixtures donated by the high school drama teacher. One teen built a DJ booth for his senior project and another girl booked the bands. Someone donated paint, and we decided to paint the floors and walls the way we liked it. As the years went on, the lights and stage were replaced and the floor was repainted many times – but always under the teens’ direction. The bands were punk, metal, and rock. The group ETA put on amazing shows at The Shop.”

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One thought on “Dreams + experience = Empowered young adults”

-  **Jenny Randall** says:
August 22, 2015 at 2:07 pm

I remember those cold evenings chaperoning out at The Shop. It was great to see so many kids happy and those not so to find ‘a place’ where they belonged over time . Thank you John & Niels do your vision and to those who still hold the light.

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