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TRI-CITY TEENS DIG NEW PASCO CENTER

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By Genoa Sibold-Cohn Herald staff writer

For the past seven years, Jake Hamilton has spent his after school hours with the Boys & Girls Clubs of Benton and Franklin Counties.

That's the same number of years the skill-building children's organization has been working with Mid-Columbia kids.

In that time, Hamilton, 17, of Pasco, has attended club activities at the former building in Pasco's Volunteer Park and the old Emerson Elementary School on 18th Avenue.

Now the Pasco High School senior and 50 other Tri-City teens are spending their afternoons at a new Boys & Girls Club center in Pasco just for middle school and high school students.

The Sprucewood Teen Center, 333 W. Court St., has been open since Jan. 15.

"The teen center is a whole center devoted to teens," Hamilton said. "It's a lot bigger and less noisier."

The community is invited to tour the center at 2 p.m. Feb. 26. Tri-City teens, including those who aren't club members, can participate in activities there at 3 p.m. Feb. 27.

"The teens have been excited to have a building just for themselves," said Jeff Andrews, the club's teen services coordinator.

"The membership has just blossomed," said Kathy Bryson, the club's interim director. "It's more than doubled."

The center had been used as a second club site for children of all ages. Now the 4,000-square-foot building has been revamped with lively painted rooms in lime green and shades of purple and gold.

Volunteers from Sunrise Rotary in Pasco and the Cathedral of Joy youth group in Richland have spent the past two months painting the rooms, tearing down walls and building counter space.

The Beaumont Foundation donated eight new Toshiba laptop computers for the center's lab. The teens have Internet access and can even chat online with teens from other Boys & Girls Clubs. But that's the extent of their chat room access.

Bechtel's Women's Group donated \$40,000, which helped pay for bongos and drums used in a Latin percussion class for teens, Bryson said.

The Housing Authority of Pasco and Franklin County, which owns the teen center building, has major renovation plans set for the summer, Andrews said.

One major renovation will be the addition of 12 to 15 feet to the kitchen and art room. This will allow the club to offer more cooking classes and art programs, Andrews said. In the meantime, Hamilton and his friends are reveling in the new center's offerings -- foosball, air hockey, arts and crafts and basketball.

"The benefit for me has been just having somewhere to go to practice my basketball shot and be with other kids," Hamilton said.