

Norfolk Insider

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“The Zone”

When funding for the Community Character Development Coalition in Norfolk dried up in 2010 it looked like The Zone was done too. That meant that a successful after school program since 2007 for 7th-9th grade youth would end. The youth involved and Zone staff members Julee Pfeil and Casey Preibe, made sure that wasn't going to happen.

The determination of a leadership group of ten kids and adult leaders at The Zone have helped keep it open and on its own two feet since last September. Their work has allowed kids to continue to meet three days a week, receive a healthy snack, get help with homework, and be involved in other constructive activities like volunteering in the community.

“The hours from 3:00 pm to 6:00 pm on school days are the peak time for juvenile crime, car accidents involving teens and experimentation with smoking, drugs, alcohol and sex. If a kid isn't in an extracurricular activity and struggles in school they start to wonder ‘where do I fit in here?’ All youth want a place to belong and to know they are valued.. The Zone is a safe place for our youth to belong and where they can get support with character development and social skills from caring adult mentors,” Pfeil said.

Pfeil said she learned in a seminar entitled “Understanding the Framework of Poverty” that many of the youth coming from lower economic circumstances have a mindset that is one of survival for today and that it's difficult for them to plan for the future.

“We have conversations while we're working on crafts or scrapbooking after school about what they want with their life and what they need to do to get there,” Pfeil said.

The Zone meets in a street level storefront of the Kensington, a 52 apartment complex owned and operated by the Norfolk Housing Agency.

“Our role is to make this space as economical as possible for the Zone. For seven years the Zone has made a positive impact on the youth in Norfolk and we're glad to be able to partner with them,” said Sheila Miller, Housing Director for the City of Norfolk. The Zone also occasionally rents out the City of Norfolk Auditorium as a place for the youth to do activities.

With funding from several sources, there is now paid part-time staff available to help with homework and guide the youth in various activities. Thirty-six youth were regulars at the Zone last year meeting every Tuesday, Wednesday and Thursday during the school week.

A survey taken at the end of this school year showed that 65% of the youth at the Zone felt that the homework time helped them pass to the next grade level. Sixty-five percent reported that coming to the Zone helped influence the decisions they were making at school and 100% said they would recommend the Zone to their friends and family.

“The bottom line rule at The Zone is to have unconditional respect for yourself, others and property. Our greatest hope is that our youth graduate from high school, see value in their life and know they have something they can give to someone else,” Pfeil said.