

Park Teen Center opens doors

By MARGARET REIST / Lincoln Journal Star

Elia Alvarado, who will be starting seventh grade in the fall, wandered over to her old stomping grounds Thursday morning to check out something new.

Not Park Middle School. That's been there forever on the corner of Eighth and F streets, where the slight girl with dark hair wore her own path along the hallways as she made her way through sixth grade.

No, this is not school, though it's part of the brick building, just off the cafeteria, with its own door to the outside down a sloped sidewalk off the parking lot.

Inside, there are pool and ping pong tables, video games and computers, bright pink couches and a boom box.

"It's good," said Alvarado, convinced by her friend to check out the new Park Teen Center that opened Monday.

For a short time on Thursday morning, the middle school students had to share space with city officials who set up a podium and a microphone to note the center's opening with a tad of pomp and much circumstance.

"The goal is to meet the social, recreational and enrichment needs of youth in the area," said Mayor Coleen Seng. "They can get services but they can also relax on the bright couches."

The teen center is housed in what was once 2,700 square feet of storage space on the south side of the middle school.

It now has a computer lab, a kitchenette, meeting rooms, game tables, a video game and television lounge, vending machines and office space.

More importantly, it is a place for middle school students who live in the neighborhood to hang out before and after school and during the summer.

"It's a safe place where kids feel welcome," said Dan Payzant, the teen center director. "It gives them a place where they can ... be around friends but eliminate some of the riskier choices."

It is designed for middle school students, and a student advisory council helped design the programs — and pick out the bright couches.

During the summer, when there is a \$1-a-day drop-in fee, the center staff will take kids swimming or work on gardening. There will be a mural project, pool and ping pong tournaments and karaoke contests. There will be family nights and adult workshops. Lunch is provided free through the Summer Food Program.

"The key to our programs are to really involve the kids," Payzant said. "How can the center be responsive to their needs?"

During the school year, students can drop by on their lunch hour and participate in before- and after-school programs.

Although the center is just opening, Payzant was on board this fall and helped organize clubs, tutoring and other programs. About 225 students participated.

The idea for a teen center began in 2002 when the city got a grant for academic support, recreation and career exploration at Park Middle School.

But the \$182,000 cost of remodeling the space came largely from donations from various sources as well as additional donations for program development.

"It's been an amazing transformation," said Parks and Recreation Director Lynn Johnson.

A board made up of city and Lincoln Public Schools officials oversees the center.

Elia figures she'll come back.

And so will Luis Sandoval, another seventh-grader who started coming Tuesday. His mom, he said, figures it's a good way to get him up and away from the television set.

And he's OK with that.

"It's cool," he said.

Park Teen Center

Summer hours: 9 a.m. to 5 p.m.

Cost: \$1 a day drop-in fee in the summer. Free in the fall.

Fall hours: Weekdays from 7 a.m. to 5 p.m., with evening programs scheduled until 9 p.m.; Saturdays from 9 a.m. to 3 p.m. No cost.

Staff: One full-time coordinator, two VISTA workers and five part-time staff from the Parks and Recreation Department.

Entrance: Exterior entrance is on the south side of the building; interior entrance near the cafeteria and gyms.