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## A space of their own

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### Flat River Community Library in Greenville opens new Teen Lounge

*By Cory Smith*

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From left, Greenville Middle School sixth-grader Lilly Steward, 12, sixth-grader Aevry Hamel, 11, seventh-grader Avery Bergman, 12, and sixth-grader Jona Green, 12, work on crafts as they enjoy time spent in the new Teen Lounge at the Flat River Community Library in Greenville on Feb. 25. — DN Photo | Cory Smith

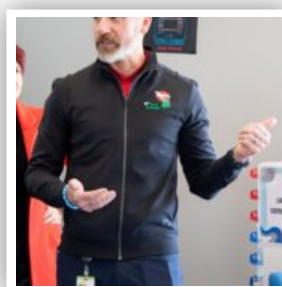
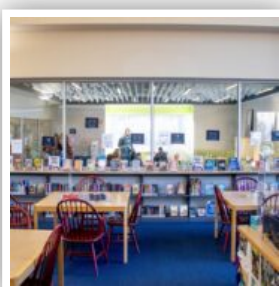
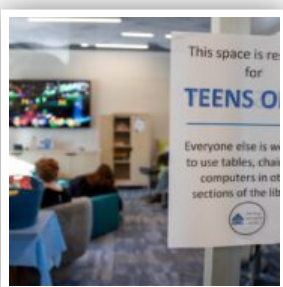
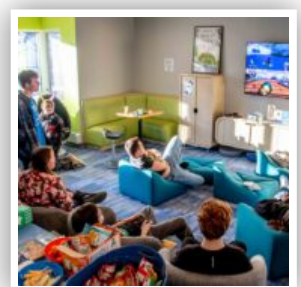
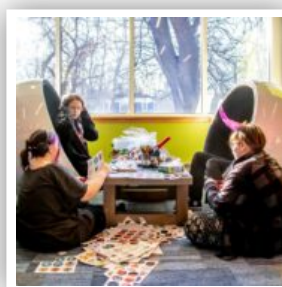
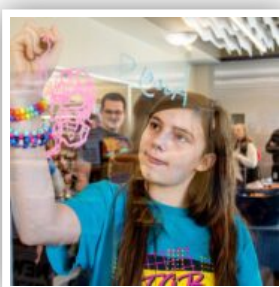
GREENVILLE — Having served on its Teen Advisory Board (TAB) for six years, Emma Read, 18, practically views the Flat River Community Library as a home away from home.

However, being a teenager and wanting to do teenager things in the quiet confines of a public library can present its challenges.

“The section of the library for teens, there wasn’t much to do and the space was very lackluster,” Read said. “There were maybe two chairs and some bookshelves. It was a little boring.”

Since the library was built in 1997, its teen section has remained essentially unchanged. To create a more engaging space, library board members collaborated with TAB over several years to transform the small corner of the library into a welcoming area designed to support how teenagers learn and play.

#### PHOTO GALLERY



Last week, members of TAB, library staff and the Greenville Area Chamber of Commerce came together to celebrate the grand opening of a new space at the library — the Teen Lounge — designed entirely to accommodate the needs and desires of teenagers.

For students such as Read, a homeschooled student from Montcalm Township, having a space dedicated to her age group at the library provides for a more immersive and enjoyable experience with each visit.

“This new space means a lot,” Read said. “I’ve been really looking forward to it being finished for quite a while now. It’s so cozy. With the walls and the doors, you can be a little louder without disturbing other people in the library.”

According to Library Director Stefanie Reed, the student members of TAB were heavily involved in the planning and designing of the Teen Lounge, from the colors picked for the carpet, walls and furniture to the kinds of games and other crafts made available for use.

“I am really grateful for all of the input they gave while we were doing this and how much they threw themselves into it,” she said. “If I say so myself, they made some really good choices. Now they are lucky enough to have their own self-crafted area that is the coolest in the library, one that everyone else is going to be jealous of.”

The Teen Lounge is sectioned off from the rest of the library, surrounded by large glass windows, two glass doors and a textured ceiling that all operate as sound-dampening measures.

The room features casual seating spaces, floor seating, dedicated study tables and one-person study desks for homework.

Additionally, the space includes a Nintendo Switch video game system, board games, crafting materials, Legos and other items for teenagers to engage in, such as laptops for doing homework.

According to Reed, the concept behind the Teen Lounge came from an unintentional lack of focus at the library on teenagers in general.

Dating back to the library’s construction, Reed said the building was designed as a welcoming space for adults, with a focus also placed on early literacy for children.

“The age group of teenagers tended to get lost in that, partly because trying to find a mechanism by which to make them feel comfortable and interested in the space is difficult,” Reed said. “You can tell them they are welcome, but that doesn’t mean they feel welcome.”

As a result, Reed said the Teen Lounge was designed as a space for teenagers to enjoy with other teenagers, and no one else.

“Seeing them embrace the space today, it is a fantastic feeling,” she said. “It dovetails with what we originally hoped and anticipated for the space, that it would have a multiplicity of purposes, allowing it to shift into what the kids need it to be.”

Reed said the Teen Lounge will operate as a space for teenagers and teenagers only.

“The only limitation is this is a space specifically for them,” she said. “Adults are not allowed and younger children aren’t allowed. That was the intent. Our staff is making sure it stays that way. A teen is not going to enter that space if they don’t feel it’s theirs. They have some autonomy, but it’s a safe autonomy.”

To create a space that the library would be confident teenagers would enjoy, Reed said they had to be involved in the process.

“We really had to meet them where they were in order to give them a safe haven to be themselves in this space and not feel as though we are imposing our own ideas on them, of what they should be doing,” she said. “We worked with the architect and they gave us some direction. They provided us a scope and the kids, they grabbed onto it and decided on what they felt would be the best options for what they wanted the space to be.”

Reed expects the Teen Lounge to be used on a near-constant basis going forward.

“The day after the last piece of furniture went in there, before we even announced anything, there were a handful of kids already in there using the space — kids I had never seen in the library before,” she said. “Sometimes that age group can get a little rowdy, but this space, it’s not only safe, but a place where they can be a little bit ridiculous. They will be under our watchful but understanding eye.”

For Youth and Teen Services Librarian Tiffany Ohman, seeing the teenagers have a space to be themselves in the library is a dream come true.

“We have teens who, while they had been coming to the library for a long time, they didn’t stay to hang out, do their homework and find it as a great peaceful environment,” she said. “TAB helped in making all of the final decisions for this space, so I’m really excited they get to benefit from this now.”

Among those who were excited to see the space in use was Greenville Mayor Jeff Scoby, who, after having sat in one of the room’s Eero Aarnio-style ball chairs, expressed regret that he was too old to use the space.

“This is an exciting new adventure for the library and great for the teens,” he said. “This lounge has a fishbowl appearance, and while everyone can look in, only teens can enter. It’s neat to see that teen interaction made this happen.”

Chamber Executive Director Paul Sischo noted that while he has helped orchestrate dozens of ribbon-cutting events for businesses, the opening of the Teen Lounge may be the “coolest” he’s attended.

“We love to celebrate with the community when cool things happen and this room is one of the coolest things I’ve seen in a long time,” he said. “I know it’s not for me, and that’s OK. I’m glad the teens have this space and I know a lot of people put in a lot of hard work to make this happen.”

According to Reed, the project came in at a cost of approximately \$200,000, utilizing the library’s general fund dollars.

“The board felt strongly that that kind of investment was really going to make a significant difference to enable us to provide new things for that cross-section of kids,” she said.

Flat River Community Library is a district library and operates under an agreement with the city of Greenville and Eureka, Fairplain and Montcalm townships. Each of those municipalities provides two board members, appointed by those municipalities, who serve on the library’s board.

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