



“Teen Warehouse” seeks to give Wilmington teens an after-school sanctuary

By LARRY NAGENGAST • OCT 5, 2018

Imagine a safe place where Wilmington teens could go after school to learn, keep fit, relax and socialize. It may sound like a dream but a collaboration of nonprofit organizations, with a lot of input from the teens themselves, is trying to make it a reality.

The piece for the project, called The Teen Warehouse, are going to take another year to fall into place but it has already attracted commitments of support from the University of Delaware, Delaware State University, the state and city governments and an array of prominent business and nonprofit organizations. The commitments include a \$1 million state grant to help with startup costs, and another \$150,000 from an anonymous individual donor.



Organizers are looking for another \$7 million in foundation or corporate grants to cover initial capital costs, and they expect the program, once it's launched, to have an annual budget of about \$1 million, which would be covered primarily by facility rentals, grants and contracts with state agencies.

Teen Warehouse is the vision of Logan Herring, who took over two and a half years ago as executive director of the Kingswood Community Center in the Riverside neighborhood of northeast Wilmington and promptly recognized that while many organizations, including his own, were offering supervised after-school programming for children in the elementary grades, teenagers had few options other than going home alone or hanging out on the streets.

Teen Warehouse, Herring says, will address three key concerns of teenagers: violence in the city, supporting academics and promoting career readiness.

Giving teens a place to go after school will keep them off the streets and out of trouble, and a diverse menu of recreational, educational, arts career and health programming crafted to meet teens' interests should keep them coming back and help them grow into responsible young adults, he says.

The motto for Teen Warehouse, Herring says, is “for teens, by teens,” so teenagers are playing a major role in deciding what types of programming will be offered in the building.

“We're using teens to solve the problem because nobody knows more about solving the problem than the people who are being affected by it,” he says.

The project got its name when Herring envisioned placing it in a vacant warehouse near Kingswood, and it got a kick-start when he pitched the concept to Reinventing Delaware, a program of the Pete du Pont Freedom Foundation. The project made such an impression on the foundation’s board, said Thère du Pont, the former governor’s son and a member of the foundation’s board of directors, that it brought in Social Contract, a business headed by education innovators and entrepreneurs Catherine Lindroth and Megan Wallace, to help accelerate the planning process. (Thère du Pont is also president of the Longwood Foundation, one of the philanthropies Teen Warehouse is soliciting for capital and operational funding.)

“We’re going after one of the central challenges in the city – teen safety,” du Pont says. “The mayor (Mike Purzycki) and the new police chief (Robert Tracy) have taken a bit of a bite out of it, but it is far from conquered. This won’t be simple, but it’s a worthy effort.”

Over the summer, with funding from the state Department of Health and Social Services, Social Contract helped Herring hire 30 teens to spend two months developing ideas for what Teen Warehouse might look like. Some of the teens had participated in the experimental Dual School project Lindroth had launched last year; others are participants in Delaware Futures, a nonprofit that provides promising high-school students from low-income families with academic supports and leadership training to position them to succeed in college.

“We asked them what they would like to see in the program, and they worked on programming ideas, how programs might be evaluated and communication,” Herring said.

Besides working together during the day, the teens organized a couple of public events, including an evening program that drew about 400 youths to the Wilmington PAL center to learn more about the program, he said.

As the ideas kept coming, so did the vision. The 10,000 square-foot warehouse Herring was eyeing quickly seemed too small, especially as an array of nonprofits expressed interest in jumping on board. “At Kingswood, our mantra is ‘we don’t create programs, we create partnerships,’” Herring explains.

Herring and his collaborators now have their sights set on the former home of the Prestige Academy, a charter middle school for boys that closed in 2017. Capital One Bank, which had held the mortgage, now owns the two-story building at the corner of 12th and Thatcher streets. The Warehouse team has developed floor plans for the site and has asked Capital One to donate the structure, but Capital One isn’t ready to make a decision, a bank spokesman said.



The building that previously housed the Prestige Academy charter school is being considered as a possible home for the Teen Warehouse.
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Herring hopes the site issue can be resolved within six months.

Meanwhile, he is launching a pilot program in the Community Education Building in downtown Wilmington, the home to a pair of charter schools, Great Oaks Academy and Kuumba Academy. The Warehouse has rented classroom space in the building and will offer after-school mentoring to about 15 middle-school students from each of the schools for the rest of the school year, with teens who worked on program development over the summer serving as mentors.

Details of the mentoring program are still being worked out, but Herring says the emphasis will be on providing additional supports that Great Oaks and Kuumba leaders believe their students would value. One potential benefit

of the pilot, Herring says, is that the Great Oaks and Kuumba students who benefit this year from mentoring might be in position to gain paid positions as mentors when they're in high school and the Warehouse is up and running at a permanent location.

As planning for the Warehouse continues, the outline for its program – and the building's structure – is coming into clearer focus.

Tentative plans for the first floor include , among other things, informal gathering spaces, a library/reading room, a kitchen, a computer lab, a STEM (science/technology/engineering/math) lab, a gym, a health center and several multipurpose classrooms. The second floor would include office space for organizations that desire to house some of their operations in the building.

Herring speaks of the teen program's "five pillars of success": recreation, education, arts, career and health. Teens who visit the center after school might be primarily interested on one area – recreation, for example – but mentors would eventually guide them into other activities. Nonprofit organizations would provide services in these areas.

Delaware Futures, for example, might offer a series of college and career exploration workshops, or sessions that would help teens and their parents fill out the Free Application for Federal Student Aid (FAFSA) form when they're ready to apply for college, says Dina Melchiorre, the organization's executive director.

Delaware Futures wouldn't need to use space at the Warehouse on a regular basis, she says, because its participants meet for two nights a week at Trinity Episcopal Church in Wilmington, but offering workshops at the Warehouse would help the organization broaden its reach. In addition, it would give its participants another place to go.

"I know where our kids are on Tuesday and Thursday nights, and I'll feel better if I know they have a safe and productive place to the other three nights of the week," she says.

According to Herring, other organizations that are expected to offer programming at Teen Warehouse include West End Neighborhood House, Hilltop Lutheran Community Center, TeenSHARP, Christina Cultural Arts Center, LYTE (Leading Youth Through Empowerment), Strive, Coded by Kids, and the Boys & Girls Clubs of Delaware. Offerings would not overlap, Herring says. Rather, the idea is to have each agency provide the type of programming it does best, whether it be art lessons, tutoring, career workshops or seminars on health topics. "Many organizations try to do everything," he says. "We encourage them to do what they do best."

In addition, Teen Warehouse is discussing working with the University of Delaware to have the university provide electric-powered buses that would shuttle teens between its site and other community centers in the city.

The university's involvement in the project will likely go beyond transportation services, says Rita Landgraf, director of its Partnership for Healthy Communities. There is enough room in the Prestige building, Herring and Landgraf say, for the university to set up a health and wellness clinic to serve participants in Teen Warehouse programs. The clinic, if established, would not compete with Westside Healthcare, which has its own clinic in the area, but would be designed to give UD students clinical experience working with youths in an urban setting, something they would not get at the university's Newark campus, Landgraf says.

Teens who participated in Warehouse planning sessions over the summer expressed interest in learning more about nutrition, mental health and reproductive health, and the university is interested in organizing workshops and other programming around these topics, Landgraf says.

Another possibility, Landgraf says, involves offering a college-level Introduction to Health Sciences class at Teen Warehouse. The one-semester class is now offered at Newark High School and St. Mark's High School, but would have to be restructured to fit into an afternoon or evening schedule.

Delaware State University is also in the mix, having applied for a foundation grant to set up a Center for Neighborhood Revitalization that would be housed on the second floor of the building and serve the redeveloping Riverside community.

In addition, Herring says Kingswood Community Center is considering relocating its Kingswood Academy, an alternative program for high school students who have been removed from their regular schools, from the former Holy Rosary School site in Claymont into the Prestige building. Kingswood Academy serves 75 to 100 students, many of whom live in neighborhoods close to the proposed Warehouse site.

On top of that, the Dual School, the entrepreneurial project-based learning high school program that was launched last year at the 1313 Innovation coworking space in Hercules Plaza, is looking for a permanent home, and the thought of housing Dual School inside a gathering place for teens is definitely appealing, Lindroth says.

Bringing in programs like Kingswood Academy and Dual School, which would operate during daytime hours, would not only keep the building humming all day long but would also generate rental income to cover operating expenses, Herring says.

As planning for Teen Warehouse continues, Herring acknowledges that it looks like a mammoth task, but he's encouraged by teenage vitality – the efforts of teens from Marjorie Stoneman Douglas High School in Parkland, Florida, launching a national campaign against gun violence earlier this year and of the teens in Wilmington who worked on Warehouse planning over the summer.

“Teens aren't jaded. They haven't been beaten down,” he says. “And this project isn't just going to help revitalize Riverside. It will help revitalize the entire city.”

But the Teen Warehouse will start with Riverside, where is expected to become the first visible component of a much larger project, the revitalization of that community in the northeast section of the city.

The Riverside Renaissance Development Corporation, known as REACH Riverside, has been created to oversee the larger project, which would include replacing deteriorating housing units in the community, now mostly subsidized units managed by the Wilmington Housing Authority, with mixed-income house and developing a stronger business corridor along Northeast Boulevard, the area's primary commercial artery. The project will also include construction of a new building to replace the aging Kingswood Community Center.

The acronym REACH stands for Redevelopment, Education and Community Health.

Members of the REACH organization have been consulting with Purpose Built Communities, an Atlanta-based nonprofit, that provides technical support for transformational redevelopment efforts. Purpose Built Communities now has affiliations with redevelopment projects in 18 cities, and Logan Herring, executive director of the Kingswood Community Center, expects REACH Riverside and Purpose Built Communities to finalize a partnership arrangement within the next month or so.

Many of the organizations involved with Teen Warehouse, including the University of Delaware, Delaware State University, the city and state governments, the Wilmington Housing Authority and United Way of Delaware will play a role in the redevelopment. Details are likely to be announced by the end of the year, Herring says.