



Free Press Photos by BOB SWANSON

Jane Driscoll tends the "bar" as teens order colas, burgers and fries from the grill. Jake Huffman's paintings hang on the back wall.



Gabe Coleman, 11, of Burlington, lines up a shot at the pool table.

242 Main

Burlington Teens Have Their Own Place



Maura O'Neill, 11, of Burlington, puts her feet up with an after-school soda.

By CHRIS LAVIN
Free Press Staff Writer

Teen-agers get involved these days. They make floats for homecoming parades, put on musicals, raise money for charity — and they all seem to belong to the student council and school band.

They are the kids who are "involved."

But at 242 Main, Burlington's newest youth art center designed and staffed by teen-agers, kids with pink haircuts mingle with charm school graduates, the grill turns out hamburgers and fries for artists and pool sharks alike. And most of them don't belong to the student council.

"Depending on the band," said Jane Driscoll, director of the Mayor's Youth Office, "we can reach any kid in Burlington."

242 Main opened last weekend with an art exhibit, two rock bands and about 200 teen-agers who paid their admission, got stamped on the hand and signed up for club membership. They sidled up to the bar, ordered colas and listened to the music.

"People might say, 'Oh, it's just a place to hang out,' and it certainly is," Driscoll said. "But it's a place to hang out where people care. And kids pick up on that."

Plans for the center have been churning through the youth office for more than a year. Some people have criticized the center's location, saying it should have been in

the Old North End, or the south side of town, and not so near the YMCA or King Street Youth Center.

"Teen-agers come downtown anyway," Driscoll said. "Teen-agers just go downtown on a regular basis, no matter what. But there's no place where they can hang out without spending a lot of money."

"What we want is a place for them to belong socially — a place for them to meet in the central city."

Mayor Bernard Sanders, who created the youth office in June 1981, said the center is an outgrowth of the youth office's function.

"What we hope to accomplish is to create a place where kids from all walks of life, not just the straight-A student, will feel comfortable, enjoy the music they enjoy and relate to each other comfortably in an environment which disallows drugs, alcohol and even the smoking of cigarettes," Sanders said.

The white-washed brick walls of the center, in the basement of Memorial Auditorium, are covered with bright, violent paintings by Jake Hoffman, and black and white photographs by Jeff Lamoureux. Innovative booths are set along the windows, some high off the ground, a wooden stage opens up into a pit for another place to sit.

Young people from 11 through their teens have been walking in all week. They come to see the art, to play pool or chess, to have a hamburger and a milkshake after school to do their homework.

"I like the French fries," said Aaron

Steele, an 11-year-old sixth-grader who stopped by after school at Edmund's Elementary. Sometimes Aaron goes downtown, to an arcade, sometimes home or to a friend's house.

In a wooden booth at a window, two 17-year-olds sat, quietly talking.

"A lot of my friends hang out here and I see them," Todd Garrett said.

"The bands are the best thing," said Paul Mears, who sported a bushy Mohawk haircut. "This place is a good idea. I hope a lot of people come so they don't close it down."

The center was planned, designed and constructed by teen-agers working through the Mayor's Youth Office. The center is open every day of the week, and although the grill is staffed by teen-agers, someone from the Mayor's Youth Office — Driscoll, Bonnie Johnson or Kathy Lawrence — is always there. Monday and Wednesday hours are 2 to 9 p.m.; Tuesday and Thursday, 2 to 6 p.m.; Friday and Saturday, 2 to 11 p.m., and Sunday 2 to 6 p.m.

After school, younger students visit the center. In the late afternoon and on weekends, the crowd is mostly teen-agers. Wednesday night the center's video club meets to review films or videos made by young people.

Monday nights are open, Driscoll said. Free guitar lessons might be offered, but more ideas are always popping up.

On Friday and Saturday nights, tablecloths are spread over the tables and teen

chefs are let loose in the kitchen to create international cuisine, from Italy to Mexico.

"These are some really good cooks," Driscoll said. "The food is fantastic. From 5:30 to 7:30, teens can bring dates, or all go out together, for a full meal. They do that anyway, but always go for pizza because they can't afford anything else."

At 7:30, the music starts. Tonight, the Hollywood Indians will share the stage with The Freaks, a band made up of 11- to 15-year-olds.

On Sunday, the "brunch club" puts the chefs to work for the brunch discussion series. Speakers — artists, politicians and professors — will be invited to talk about issues that concern teen-agers from noon to 2. Driscoll said.

At 2 p.m., the center transforms to coffee house.

"There is no coffee house in all of Burlington," Driscoll said. Young poets, singers or pianists will take the stage.

"It's one thing to give a mike to a 9-year-old. That's nice," Driscoll said. "But for that 9-year-old to be able to sing back-up to a professional musician that he or she admires is another thing. That's what this whole place is about — interaction."

"It's a place where they can be treated as the young adults they are becoming."