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## The **Front Door Student Center** serves Strafford **teens** fun with a motivational twist.

BY JOHN PRIEST

**A**bout three blocks from Strafford Public Schools, a row of nondescript old buildings lines historic Route 66 in a weathered monotony of mortar, brick and stucco. Inside is the Front Door Student Center, which opened in March as an after-school hub for all things young, fun and educational. Alter Student Ministries and Strafford First Assembly of God are spearheading the project with a nonjudgmental Christianity that mimics efforts of similar 417-land projects such as Springfield's NuBrew Coffeehouse and Joplin's The Foundry. But if leaders have their way, The Front Door Student Center will evolve away from the church into a self-sufficient community effort for keeping Strafford's teenagers off the streets and on the track to success.

The center hinges not only on community support but also on the center's youthful leadership. Jeremy Zahn, 26, heads the crew with Abby Whitmore and Mike Maschmeyer, both 24. Each has his or her own specialty and vision for the center, but they all agree on one thing: The Front Door Student Center has been a long time coming. A combined 26 years of dreaming helped the trio transform Carl Keiser's empty downtown building into the home of the after school center. Walls came down, walls went up and more than \$25,000 went into completing the 3,325-square-foot project. With a flyer campaign in Strafford schools and almost seven months of activities and concerts under its belt, the center has edged onto the teenage radar.

Every day just past 3 p.m., more than 30 kids 12 and older trek to The Front Door Student Center. As teens flood through the doors, downtown's function and industry vanish, replaced with an atmosphere that screams fun for the sake of fun. Flashy paint treatments rise from the multicolored concrete floors, and halogen lights suspend from a black ceiling. The main room houses fun in every corner: a café, video games, a ping-pong table and a music stage. The décor's brightness and youth clash dramatically with the building's dull, unmarked

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>> Strafford youth have a new place to stay entertained and out of trouble. The Front Door Student Center wants to keep teens off the streets.



>> Amber Kelso (left) gets a hug from Julia Quick at the Front Door Student Center.

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>> The café at The Front Door Student Center is just one of the draws for 30-plus youth that are 12-years and older and looking for after school fun.

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façade and what some see as the limited future afforded by a small town. “A lot of kids graduate from Strafford and just stay,” Maschmeyer says. “They work at McDonald’s ... the rest of their lives. That’s no future.” The center hopes to help teens dream of bigger futures by offering them a temporary escape from oppressive home situations, negative peer pressures and, most importantly, themselves. Masked by video games and bright paint schemes, The Front Door Student Center’s message focuses on motivation.

Maschmeyer says he knows all too well how self-destructive teenagers can be. With piercings, tattoos and a punky fashion sense, he doesn’t fit any style stereotypes of a goody-two-shoes youth minister. He grew up in Sikeston and says experience taught him that teens won’t make constructive choices unless the community offers constructive options. “They go get drunk,” he says. “They go get arrested. I should know because that was me in high school.” Maschmeyer says his life started to turn around when he discovered music. Four-hour drives to downtown Springfield’s burgeoning music scene ignited a passion for music and something he says he hadn’t ever had, a passion for his future. “Music pushed me to be more, to want more,” he says. Now, six years after high school, Maschmeyer plays in the band A Tragedy True and runs The Front Door Student Center music venue, known as The Griffin. As many as 150 people have attended as bands rock on Friday and Saturday nights. Maschmeyer says Strafford Assembly of God’s older members probably won’t come to the concerts, but he says they understand there’s a purpose behind the loud

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music. He hopes the music will encourage more teenagers to pick up guitars instead of beers.

But music isn’t the only trick up the center’s sleeve. Whitmore, whose petite frame blends deceptively with those of the teens that frequent the center, says education is one of the center’s foundations. Obscured by a pool table and all manners of fun, a sign announcing the Carl and Delores Keiser Learning Center hangs above three classrooms. Here, community tutors give kids the extra bit of attention they’re not getting at school. Whether learning how to factor polynomials or to write speeches, students can turn to tutors for free help. Across the hall, on the other side of the 8-foot pool table, the video production suite offers the students yet another possible passion. “We just want kids to get interested, to get a hobby,” Whitmore says. “We want to give kids a dream, a vision for the future.”

The bulk of financial support and personnel for The Front Door Student Center comes directly from Strafford First Assembly of God, but God’s not the priority. “I don’t preach at [the kids],” Whitmore says with a nervous chuckle. “It’s a safe place physically but also emotionally. Kids can talk to us about anything. We’re here for support.” Zahn, Maschmeyer and Whitmore aren’t pastors to these students. They’re friends, and they say mutual respect somehow keeps the center at a friendly chaos.

That chaos might grow if Zahn and his crew have their way. They have lofty goals that include reaching more students, involving local university students as tutors and transforming other empty buildings downtown into a teenage Mecca. Before any major changes, though, they must increase community involvement and generate regular sponsorships that can cover the six-figure annual budget. Next comes establishing a board of directors, obtaining tax-exempt status and seceding from the Strafford First Assembly of God. Eleven-year-old Pat Goddard takes a break from playing Xbox and explains what makes The Front Door Student Center worthwhile. “It’s like really fun and stuff.”