



Published June 7th, 2023

SWELL Center at LLLC offers respite for teens and tweens this summer

By Sharon K. Sobotta



A welcoming, inclusive space for teens to gather, meet new friends, unwind, play games, and if they want, try new activities!

A little over a year ago, a cohort of caring community members co-imagined what it would be like to give tweens and teens in Lafayette a safe place to land, where they could connect with other youth, try their hand at an activity, have some nutritious food, and be free to just be. The radical idea blossomed into a program and a space within the Lafayette Library and Learning Center called the SWELL Center. The Center opened June 5 and offers an assortment of activities, snacks and authentic connection opportunities for rising sixth-12th graders throughout Lamorinda on a daily basis from 10:30 to 2:30 p.m. during weekdays leading up to July 28.

Image provided

Beth Needle, the executive director of the Lafayette Library and Learning Center Foundation, said the

collective that brought the SWELL Center to fruition used an 'if we build it, they will come' approach and hoped for the best. "We hypothesized that if teens had a place to go when school was not in session, a place where all students were welcome, a place to gather, to explore and engage either individually or with friends, that they might feel that sense of community or belonging that we all need," Needle said. "Unfortunately, in Lafayette there was not a place to go (before the SWELL Center formalized).

Thankfully, Needle said, the foundation board had a vacant space and some of the key elements of getting the project off the ground. "The Foundation board supported the concept, provided seed money and with an additional grant from the Community Foundation of Lafayette we opened our doors and the kids came," Needle recalled. "It was a wonderful thing to watch."

Some of Needle's co-conspirators or collaborators for the SWELL Center included Jennifer Wakeman from the City of Lafayette, Lynna McPhatter-Harris, manager of the Wellness program for the Acalanes Union High School District and Suzy Pak, a volunteer on the committee, who also happens to be on the Lafayette School District governing board. At the time there had been an uptick in suicide ideation and attempts and the need for positive outlets was undeniable. "We knew that Wellness Centers in the schools provided an excellent resource for students but only when school was in session and that unfortunately it was during school breaks that suicide (ideation and attempts) increased," Needle said.

Pak said that even as the program continues to evolve, it offers something great to those who engage. "The SWELL Center continues to evolve to meet the attendees where they are, as seen through repeated visits and lots of positive feedback. It also highlights many facets of our incredible Library and Learning Center, making it more accessible to our young residents and increasing future visits," Pak said. "Our attendees walk away with a great appreciation for the staff and services at our local library, while having a great time and meeting new friends."

A rising ninth-grader shared her experience of engaging with the SWELL Center during a community forum in the LLLC last fall. "It was awesome to be able to connect with real friends, where you could be your real self and not have to worry about trying to impress fake friends," she said. "You can truly be yourself there, as you try new activities, eat food and have a genuinely good time."

Reach the reporter at: info@lamorindaweekly.com

[back](#)

Copyright © Lamorinda Weekly, Moraga CA