

John Martin makes good use of its new youth health centre

by Suzanne Rent

Over the past several months at John Martin Junior High, an empty classroom has turned into something extraordinary for the school's students. The room is now the official home of a youth health centre, an initiative started by Pam Briand, a public health nurse who works at John Martin on a weekly basis.

In September, Briand approached Principal Joseph about creating a health centre for the

students. During the previous school year, Briand had helped organize a girls' group, and now that she had more time at the school—up to one day a week—she thought an established centre would help reach more students.

"I wanted to create more of an engagement model and get more students involved. The school really bought into that idea," Briand says.

Of course, there was the question of funding.

Briand discovered the Schools Plus Program, whose goal is to make schools a convenient place for the government to deliver services to families. Briand connected with Marlene Ruck Simmons, the Schools Plus Program leader, who told Briand there was, in fact, funding for such a centre.

"Then we were really up and running," Briand says.

With the funding behind them, Briand, Principal Joseph, two teachers, guidance counsellor Laura MacLean and a group of about ten Grade 9 students got to work. For an hour each week, from early October till Christmas break, the team worked on turning the empty classroom into a health centre. The funding from Schools Plus helped with the purchase of furniture, and students created the decor with their own artwork.

In the meantime, students were surveyed about what services they wanted to see at the centre. The most popular requests included information on career planning, drugs, relationships with family and friends, alcohol and sex. Eventually, students from Grades 7 and 8 started visiting the centre. Briand says from the beginning, the centre was really a student-driven project.

"The students embraced anything we brought forward...and sometimes they went off in a different direction than we expected."

One of those directions resulted in the creation of a glee club, which started when a

group of students took the room's computer and LCD projector and played music videos from YouTube. That inspired one teacher, Miss Morrison, to start the glee club, which uses the centre for practices.

On May 31, that glee club put on a performance at the grand opening of the centre. Students, teachers, community leaders and officials from Capital Health were all invited to check out the centre, enjoy some refreshments and hear the glee club perform.

For Briand, the opening was a highlight of all of their hard work.

"There are lots of good things going on in

there. It feels fantastic." Still, she says, the work is not finished. She'd like to see the centre continue operating, even if she takes on a different job assignment. In the fall, she plans on meeting with the principal and the folks from Schools Plus to find out how the centre can expand and get more kids involved, and where additional funding can be accessed. For Briand, the centre is really about building relationships with the students and giving them a safe, comfortable place in which to learn, ask questions and be themselves.

"Little by little the trust is building."



Top: Students looking up health information in the youth health centre.

Bottom: When the centre is not being used for health programming, it transforms into a practice space for the school's glee club.