

^{West Salem} Coulee News Online

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When you first walk in, the scent of a new building fills the air, kicking up hints of fresh paint and a plaster-like smell. The soft light slightly disperses some shadows while fully illuminating other nooks and corridors, but it looks like a maze because the rooms are empty and open sections span wooden studs where there should be walls.

For the most part it's quiet, except for the occasional swish of movement off in the distance — highlighted by a noise that sounds like a flat, metal tool grazing moist sand. There's no one around, yet somehow the presence of children can be felt, and their future conversations and laughter are heard gently flowing about the area.

It's coming together.

Soon, the West Salem Boys & Girls Club is expected to be up, running and providing a safe place for area youth to learn, interact or just hang out. Progress on the new facility is coming along very well, according to Don and Cheryl Brenengen, members of the Village People Youth Committee overseeing the project, and it is hoped the doors will be open by the end of the school year.

"It's important to have a club like this because it affects the quality of life for everyone," Cheryl said. "Here they can just come and be. It's just a place where they know they can come and be safe."

For the last four years, a local Boys & Girls Club has been a vision of the Village People, a non-profit strategic planning group that aims to revitalize downtown West Salem. The group early on identified youth as one of its focus points, said Cheryl, and they wanted to provide them with some type of safe, recreational opportunity. Following surveys, studies and community-wide discussion, the Boys & Girls Club was made one of the group's top priorities.

"It's a positive place for kids to go," said Don, who was actually a Boys & Girls Club member in La Crosse as a youth. "They have the opportunity to do more things they can't do at home. I never had a chance to play pool — the first time playing pool was at a Boys & Girls Club.

"It's just a real positive experience."

The Boys & Girls Club of America dates back to 1860 when it was formed in Connecticut as just the Boys Club; in 1990, it changed its name to the Boys & Girls Club. During its history, the organization has dedicated itself to offering youth programs and services at an affordable membership; locally, services and programs planned include art, music, theater, tutoring, cooking, basketball and Internet access. Today, according to the Boys & Girls Club's Web site, there are about 4,000 clubs serving over 4.6 million youth in the U.S., Puerto Rico, the Virgin Islands and international military bases.

The West Salem Boys & Girls Club became an even bigger reality when it found a home last fall, leasing the former West Salem Clinic for \$1 a year from Franciscan Skemp when it closed its Leonard Street location. Major fundraising efforts have been on-going for about the last 16 months — including appearances by West Salem grad and Milwaukee Brewers catcher Damian

Miller — but there is still more to be done in terms of monetary and donation needs.

“We still have a ways to go,” said Don, who serves as president of the youth committee.

From a funding standpoint, the committee set a goal of raising \$600,000, of which about \$490,000 has been raised. Under guidelines set forth by the Boys & Girls Club of America, clubs need to raise an operating budget for three full years before it can open, and those funds account for future equipment and operating expenses; in the case of the West Salem club, \$492,000 needed to be procured.

The additional \$108,000 was a goal set by the committee as an endowment to help defray costs of future funding.

“The endowment is critical to ensure the future of the club,” Don said.

The Village People Youth Committee is also hoping to find volunteers for physical labor — from drywall work to installing cabinets to cleaning — as well those willing to donate items — from computers to tables to board games.

“It’s really important that we have the community’s support, and we certainly have had it,” said Vicki Miller, secretary of the West Salem Boys & Girls Club Advisory Committee, which functions under the youth committee. “But just a reminder that any donation is so much appreciated and it really adds up.

“The more we can push now, the faster we can open.”

The target age group for the West Salem Boys & Girls Club is youth ages 7 to 17, and studies have projected its membership just from the West Salem School District to be about 280 in the next three to five years, although the club would be open to surrounding areas like Bangor as well.

For now, hours of operation will likely be 3-7 p.m. during the school year with extended hours during the summer, Don said. Annual memberships will be \$15, although there will be funds available for low-income members.

“No one will be excluded,” Don said.

Cheryl said the youth and advisory committee will soon begin its search for a director for the club. When the club is up and running and funds are collected, she said it is planned that a local Boys & Girls Club Board of Directors will be formed and the Village People will hand over supervision.

For now, work will continue on the new club — laying a new foundation for the building and the community.

“This helps kids be more productive and responsible, and that’s a benefit for the community,” Cheryl said. “It’s a benefit for the whole area.”

TO DONATE: Send donations to: B&GC of West Salem, c/o Village People, PO Box 10, West Salem, WI 54669.

To donate labor or supplies, contact

Cheryl Brenengen at 304-6000.

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