

Rotarians Get Scoop on Boys, Girls Club

By Mark Haney

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Not only giving boys and girls something to do in the afternoons, but offering them direction, hope and care. This is just a few of the goals of the Boys and Girls Clubs of America. Doug Friedlander, a teacher at Central High School and organizer for the Phillips County Boys and Girls Club, met with the Helena-West Helena Rotary Club at their Wednesday meeting to discuss the organization's plans and where they currently stand in getting a Boys and Girls Club established in Phillips County.

Friedlander, a Rotarian himself, stated that he came to Phillips County to teach at Central through the Teach for America program more than two years ago. Even though his commitment to the program is completed, he said there is a spark in the community that's helped him decide to stay.

"Generally there are two reasons - both positive and negative - why a lot of people move to Phillips County," Friedlander stated. "On the negative side, they say, 'things are so bad here that if I leave now, what will happen to my kids?' On the positive side, they say, 'It's so exciting now that I can't afford to leave'."

Friedlander stated that for him, it was the positive reason that he decided to stay. The hunger and ambition he sees in his students' eyes inspires him every day.

According to Friedlander, the need for a Boys and Girls Club in Phillips County is overwhelming.

"Did you know that by the time a student in Phillips County reaches the seventh grade, more than a quarter of their class - 29 percent to be exact - have become sexually active?" Friedlander stated. "That's 12- and 13- year old kids."

According to Friedlander, the problems a Boys and Girls Club would help overcome includes teenage pregnancies, AIDS, STDs, drug and tobacco use, crime, obesity, fighting and physical and sexual abuse.

"The root cause of these problems is that there are insufficient opportunities to cultivate a healthy identity," Friedlander stated.

"These kids have talent, but for example at Eliza Miller there is no form

of student government to get involved with and there are really no extra curricular activities. There is insufficient access to positive access and role models and insufficient supervision. That's not the parents' fault because they have to work to make ends meet."

He added that the time of day when children get into trouble the most is between 3 and 8 p.m. - the time of day the Boys and Girls Clubs are open.

As for what a Boys and Girls Club is, Friedlander stated that it is a dedicated youth facility staffed by caring individuals. The club provides programs in five key areas: character and leadership, education and career, health and life skills, the arts and sports, fitness and recreation.

Proven to be a highly successful organization, Friedlander listed some statistics that he said were the average in every city a club is located.

"Teenage pregnancy has dropped 50 percent," he stated. "School absences are down 87 percent. Homework completion has increased 81 percent. The students' GPAs have increased 15 percent."

Currently, surrounding communities such as Marion, Wynne, Forrest City, West Memphis and Memphis have Boys and Girls Clubs while Marianna is looking into starting one.

"We have the foundation for success in a strong and committed start-up board that has been meeting and working on the project almost weekly," he added. "In addition, our affiliation with the Boys and Girls Club gives us guidance and the best practices along with access to resources and high-quality leadership. Boys and Girls Clubs hire their executive directors from within the club and we've already narrowed our choices down to three people from three proven clubs."

Friedlander said that during the club's initial year in Phillips County it would be located in the Delta Fellowship Church while renovations are being made to its permanent location in the old H & M building.

"Our tentative opening date is June 1 and we hope to create a strong base of operation," He added. "Our next steps are to hire a director, prepare the facility, raise funds for operating expenses, begin a massive membership and recruitment campaign and a board development. As far as funding is concerned, we are hoping to raise \$100,000 by spring "

Friedlander stated that after contacting several groups, the level of funds had already reached \$75,000.

He added that if anyone wanted to help, there were a number of things that can be done.

"We need help recruiting volunteers and members," he concluded. "We need help securing monetary donations and grants, and help setting up the facility."