

# Partnerships and Teen Involvement Keep Programs in the Library

In July of 2009, our library's budget took a turn for the worse, as did many other library budgets across the country. I no longer had preparation time or off-desk time to run teen programs. The teens who had been involved in library programs were very disappointed.

A year earlier, I had become involved in our county's Teen Prevention Coalition, which I suggested that we rename the Healthy Culpeper Teen Empowerment Coalition. When I told the members of the Coalition that the 2009 cuts meant I would no longer be able to have teen programs, the chair and prevention coordinator, Alan Rassmussen, connected with the Scott Fisher Foundation, a suicide prevention group, and helped us secure money to offer some teen programs. We began a gaming program after I researched the benefits of gaming events.

The gaming program was popular from the start and we averaged about eighteen teens at each monthly session. Initially, most teens played games like Apples to Apples, Taboo, and Pictionary, and some played Risk or Scrabble. A volunteer brought the strategy games Pirateer and Forbidden Island. Today, most of our teens play strategy games, such as Rune Age, Battlestar Galactica, Forbidden Island, and 7 Wonders. We did not feature many video games, just Kinect dance and sports, and the players drop in at the Kinect station between games. Thanks to the Scott Fisher Foundation, and the Healthy Culpeper Teen Empowerment Coalition, we have been able to continue programming, and have teen volunteers running most of the games.

In late 2011, the teen attendance at gaming was waning, down to about fourteen teens per event. I reported this to the Healthy Culpeper Teen Empowerment Coalition, noting that I did not have an

advisory group or diverse events because I did not have the money for staffing or materials. Again, Rassmussen and the Scott Fisher Foundation stepped up to the plate. With the additional grant funding they provided, I was able to start a teen advisory group in March of 2012.

Since March, we have come a long way. I hired Kim Jebson for six hours per month to help me run a second teen program each month, in addition to my monthly teen advisor meetings/training sessions, and gaming. When we found that six hours a month was not enough, we added an extra four hours.

Our initial goal was to have the teen advisors become official library volunteers; decide what events for teens we should hold at the library; and break into committees to work on event planning. Soon after the program began, we learned that the teens were not

making headway because they needed guidance from adults, and they needed training on how to brainstorm and have meetings. Further, the teens did not have the time it takes to plan all facets of complex events.

Jebson and I began to have three to four committee meetings with the teens per month. It was difficult to get consistent attendance from some members, and not all members were easy to contact. One of the conditions of being a teen advisor was to check email every three days, but this was not hap-



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pening. When a meeting was missed, we couldn't share what was accomplished. I created a "Should I Join a Committee" form that I distributed to the teen advisors at our August meeting. The results were just for them, but it made expectations clear. They had to score a certain number of points to qualify as a committee member.

The teen advisors played a large role in this past summer's No Hunger Games: We Will Feed You events; a teen-run book club on **Monster** by Walter Dean Myers; Frost It! Teens vs. Cupcakez (a cupcake decorating contest); and Improvaganza 1.

Improvaganza 1 was the first completely teen-planned and teen-run event. The members of this committee really soaked up the lessons presented at a September training on how to brainstorm and run meetings. I sat in and offered opinions, but the committee members ran their own meetings and took their own minutes. It took three intense two-hour meetings to get the event planned. Then, I created flyers, gathered materials, and organized event details into an outline and script that the teens could refer to as a guide while running the event. The teenagers who planned and ran this event were exhausted at the end of each meeting, and noted that it was harder than they thought to put something like that together.

Their hard work paid off when nineteen teenagers, in addition to the five committee members in charge, attended the event in November 2012. All of the participants voted for a second Improvaganza. One of the best things about this event was that it drew ten new teenagers into attending library events. Several of them are now coming to our other teen programs. The same committee that planned the first Improvaganza is now putting together a second theater improvisation event for March 2013.

When planning our cupcake-decorating event (led by Jebson), we had to evaluate how much responsibility for finalizing and running events we could give to the teens. Some teens were ready to accept this responsibility, while others just were not. We decided that the teen advisors could brainstorm ideas for events, choose which activities were feasible, practice running meetings, and be responsible for set up, clean up, and helping during an event; however, they could not be in charge of the event entirely unless they actually had the time, dedication, maturity, and leadership skills. The library staff needed to make the final calls on activities, timing,



IMPROVAGANZA FLYER.



TEENS VS. CUPCAKEZ

and assigning who would be doing what during the event. The teens still felt empowered—and maybe a little relieved—that they did not have to run so many meetings when they had homework and other activities. The hope is that they will develop more of the skills and maturity needed to be more involved as they work with Jebson and I as partners or helpers.

We continue to provide training sessions for teens: Autism, Leadership, How to Run Meetings and Brainstorm, and How to Interact with New People.

There were at least twenty young adults present at each of these events, and they provided positive feedback on surveys. Rasmussen, will be coming in soon to provide a "resilience" workshop. Resilience is all about coping with tough times.

Another quick note on partnering with the local Prevention Coalition: the teenagers involved in some of our training sessions began to view the library staff in charge as social workers or therapists. It is good when teens open up, but it is important to know when and where to refer them should serious issues arise. Jebson and I have learned to set limits on how involved we become in the teens' personal affairs. It is beyond the scope of our jobs and experience to get overly involved. While we are empathetic, and listen intently, we do not give out much advice, and we ask if a parent or professional is involved in

helping with difficult situations. If not, we try to contact a parent, with permission from the teen.

We are having a wonderful time and have learned how very much teens can do. We will continue to offer training as the need arises, and provide opportunities for the teen advisors to make important decisions and help with important tasks. ■

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