

After school Program called 'godsend' for parents, kids

BY JOANNE MALIBESKI
STAFF WRITER
jmalibesk@theobserver.com

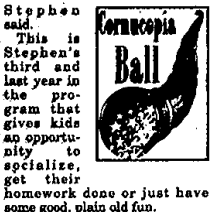
Imagine being 13 years old and coming home to an empty house after school with no one to talk to and nothing to do. It happens every day across America, but not necessarily in Farmington and Farmington Hills.

"We have always struggled with child care," said Farmington resident Sue Oleson, a speech pathologist with the Northville Public Schools. Sue and her husband, Claude, previously used car pools and a woman who provided day care when their children Kristan, 18, and Stephen, 13, were younger. "Kristan would come home, do her homework and practice her violin," Oleson said.

But that wasn't Stephen, who walks to school in the morning. "He felt really uncomfortable coming home to an empty house," Oleson said.

With no car pool available, the Olesons had a problem. That's when the Youth and Family Program entered the picture.

"It's cool. I don't have to go home and just sit around,"



Stephen said. This is Stephen's third and last year in the program that gives kids an opportunity to socialize, get their homework done or just have some good, plain old fun.

Kids have the choice of attending four centers, one in each quadrant of the community: Farmington Hills Ice Arena, William Costick Center, YMCA and Warner Middle School. The Farmington Public Schools provide transportation to kids from their schools and between the centers.

"You can go anywhere," Stephen said. "I like the ice arena the best. Most of the people who go there go to Power."

But on Wednesdays, Stephen goes to the Costick Center and then to the Botofer Rehabilitation Center, where the kids participate in an aerobic-like activity and weight lifting.

At the ice arena, on the other

hand, Stephen and his buddies play pool, video games, work on computers and skate. And if the kids want, they can do their homework.

Without the program, Stephen figures he "would just come home and be bored for a couple of hours."

And the program is free. "When I called to inquire and asked how do we pay for this, I was told there is no cost," Oleson said.

The program is designed and targeted for middle school children, who are considered to be a "high trouble age," said Todd Lips, director of the Youth and Family Program.

The program accommodates 160-350 children daily. "It gives parents a chance to know that their children have a safe, healthy place to go to that's well-supervised," Lips said.

The four centers also give kids some variety and flexibility, as well as a chance to have fun and socialize. And there's help available from the grown ups at the centers to help with homework, Lips said.

The afterschool program was born from the creation of a commission in 1994-95 that studied the needs of families and youths in the area. The commission received a grant through the Juvenile Justice Department for \$349,000 for each of three years.

When the grant ran out in June 1999, other sources of income became necessary. Now \$100,000 from Farmington Hills' recreation millage has been set aside for the program for 10 years, plus about \$26,000 from the city of Farmington and another \$125,000 in proceeds from the annual Cornucopia Ball for the afterschool program, under the guise of the Farmington Hills Area Youth and Family Services, Lips said.

"We're finding that kids tell us



Thankful: Sue Oleson and her son, Steve, are happy with the after school program that allows Steve to meet with friends and participate in activities in a supervised setting.

"It's good for us. It really has met our needs. I feel fortunate to be part of this community. I always know he's in a good place being supervised."

Sue Oleson
—Parent

have this amount of money. What do you guys want?" Oleson agreed.

"I think Todd has done a wonderful job of putting together this program. He makes it child centered. The kids generate the

program." She also can go to work without worrying what Stephen does after school or of him staying home alone.

"It's good for us. It really has met our needs. I feel fortunate to be part of this community. I always know he's in a good place being supervised," Oleson said.

"It fosters independence and provides a safe environment to socialize. Children don't have that anymore. Neighborhoods aren't close-knit groups like they used to be.

"We hope this program continues for other families."

For tickets or more information on the Cornucopia Ball, which is scheduled for Friday, Nov. 12, at the Glen Oaks Country Club in Farmington Hills, call Susanne Lichtman, 248-866-6642.

it's the safe place to go," Lips continued. "They can make choices that are better than some they could make somewhere else."

Stephen wouldn't disagree, nor would his parents. "I love it. It's a godsend to know Stephen is some place safe and having an environment to hang out in with his buddies," Oleson said.

While Stephen walks to Power Middle School, most of his close buddies live too far for another walk. That's why the afterschool program is important to Stephen. It's a chance to be with his friends in a fun and safe

environment. The program also fills a void, Stephen said. Formerly involved in sports, middle school brought more homework, leaving him without time for organized activities.

The program gives Stephen a chance to meet other kids, as well as adults - counselors, who also are role models. "The counselors are a big part of why I go. They are a lot of fun," he said admiringly as he recalled the roster of counselors in the program.

Stephen also gives kudos to Lips and how he involves the kids in the planning of the program.

"He includes us. You get to choose whether you want another computer. We are told, 'we

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