



Photos by Louise Wrege / HP staff

Teen Center Director Jeffrey Booker at the Boys & Girls Clubs of Benton Harbor takes a break Monday to talk about his work at the club since he took over last June.

New director, new philosophy

Popularity of BH Boys & Girls Club is on the rise

By LOUISE WREGE
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BENTON HARBOR — Usage has shot up dramatically since Benton Harbor native Jeffrey Booker took over directing the Teen Center of the Boys & Girls Club of Benton Harbor.

When he became director in June, the club averaged serving less than 10 teens a day, he said. Now, they average serving almost 80 students each day.

“We were serving five to 10 students a day in a \$2 million investment,” he said.

The new Teen Center opened in 2012 at 190 W. Empire Ave. across the street from Benton Harbor High School. Booker said something needed to be done to attract more teens.

“Just because you have a new building doesn’t mean that individuals are going to show up,” he said. “You have to go out to where your clientele is at.”

He said he couldn’t have done it without his staff. He said they worked to



Teen Center Program Assistant Natalie Logan, left, talks Monday with two members at the Boys & Girls Club of Benton Harbor. They are 16-year-old Kasady Rogers, middle, and Imani Lee, 14.

build relationships with 10 surrounding high schools and with the teens.

Booker said the club strives to lay a foundation of stability, consistency and safety.

“That’s just what teenagers need, particularly here in Benton Harbor,” he said. “Teens love to be in a safe environment.”

He said the teen center is the only safe haven for many of the club members.

“There is no other safe place where you can have a positive conversation with

an adult,” he said.

In the past, teens who broke the rules were suspended.

“I don’t believe in suspending kids,” he said. “There’s a reason why they’re here.”

Instead, he said teens who get in trouble are given jobs at the teen center.

“I’ll give them 30 days. It may be no more than taking out the trash or cleaning tables,” he said. “We’re not here to just kick you out, because by kicking

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you out, you can become even more of a problem.’

Booker said he hasn’t had a teen refuse to do the work, yet. The longest a teen has stayed away from the club because he or she didn’t want to do the work was two days, he said.

“If this is where your friends are at, sometimes you have to mend those fences.”

The club wasn’t always the place most kids wanted to hang out at, he said.

“At one point ... we were known as where the gang members and the not smart kids go,” he said.

And he said they strive to make sure that the teens are kept busy.

“As teens, you can’t let them be bored two days in a row or they’ll stop coming,” he said.

The center is constantly adding new classes. A new dance class started on Monday. The center has also added tutoring and a pet therapy program, among many other classes.

Booker, a 2001 BHHS graduate, has long been an advocate for teens. Before being hired at his current position, he said he worked for seven years with the Upward Bound program as a pre-college coordinator and advisor. He was also on the board of the Teen Center for about two years.

“When it comes to teens, that’s where my passion really is at,” he said. “Teens are on the cusp of our next generation. Our next leaders are actually here, either locally or in someone’s community, or in the nation or even worldwide, because you never know.”

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