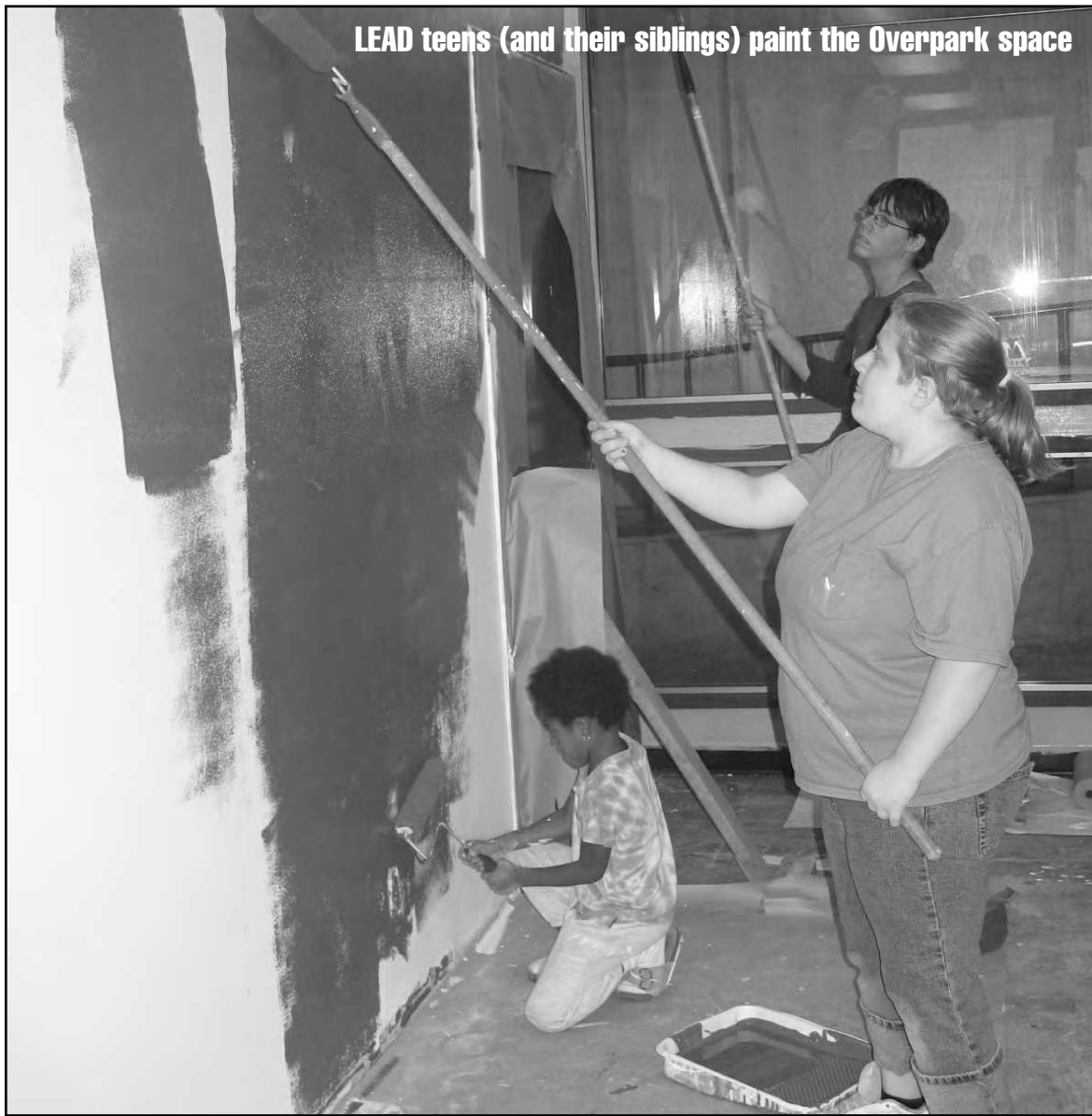


LEAD teens (and their siblings) paint the Overpark space



# A Room of Their Own

## Teen center opens to anticipation, elation

BY SUZI STEFFEN

Last February, Terra Williams was pumped. A co-coordinator for LEAD's teen center committee and a senior at Churchill Alternative High School, she knew that the city had a lot of vacant space, specifically the old fire station under City Hall, and she wanted it for the teen center.

She and her peer Nuestro Lugar/Our Place teen center planners, along with real estate broker John Brown and other locally powerful downtown supporters, went into a meeting with the city staff in late April, only to be told that the fire station wasn't up to code, wasn't safe for the teens to move into. Road block.

But the teens of LEAD (Leadership, Education, Adventure and Direction), low-income youth who learn leadership skills and gain support for their educational and career goals, don't give up easily. Nor do the youth of Positive Youth Development's Youth Advocacy Board or Juventud FACETA, a group for immigrant teens. It's not as if the teens in these partner groups haven't seen adversity before or persisted in the face of daunting odds. So the teen center committee regrouped. The Eugene City Council was, by this time, used to hearing several teen center advocates speak during each public comment session. The youth reminded councilors, professionally and firmly, that the councilors would hear them again and again ... and again ... and again ... until finally, the city of Eugene, in cooperation with Downtown Eugene, Inc., agreed to give Nuestro Lugar a space.

And the space, in Oak Alley under the Overpark and

behind the Downtown Athletic Club, wasn't exactly perfect. Holes in the ceiling, a concrete floor, years of being a storage space — not, perhaps, what the teens would have envisioned for their first center. But again, this group does not give up when faced with obstacles. After all, LEAD had years of experience meeting catch-as-catch-can in apartments, Churchill Alternative, Looking Glass' Station 7 and other spaces that didn't belong to LEAD. And partner group Juventud FACETA didn't exactly have its own space either, having met in people's homes for several years of its existence. So what if the space was dusty and broken? So what if the walls were dingy? They'd get in there and clear the space, make it welcoming for teens, make it their own.

And, over last summer, they did. LEAD groups and offices moved in last fall, and on Monday, Jan. 22, Nuestro Lugar/Our Place Teen Center opens officially as a space for low-income, multicultural and/or at-risk teens ages 12-17. The grand opening for the public is Friday, Jan. 26 from 6 to 8 pm at 965 Oak Alley. There, everyone can see the quiet table space in which teens do homework with donated textbooks, the computer lab, the space for counseling and mentoring from the adults associated with Nuestro Lugar and, of course, the couches where they can hang out, making friends with other teens who know what it's like not to have any place to go.



On Martin Luther King Jr. Day, Caleb Pruzynski rediscovered the feeling of having no spot to call his own. The library was closed. School was closed. He had been to the mall with his siblings, where, thanks to a gift from his step-grandparents, he was able to get lunch and buy a T-shirt. "It's the first clothing I've ever bought for myself with my own money," he said. But that pretty much did it for the gift, and he came downtown for a meeting at Nuestro Lugar. Oops: It, too, was closed. And it was cold outside — though Caleb, a 14-year-old freshman at South Eugene High School, claimed not to feel it. Maybe that was because of his hat, which he wore because on his family's farm in Walton, the pipes were frozen; he couldn't get any water for a shower.

When Caleb stood up to speak at the City Council meeting on Jan. 8, Mayor Kitty Piercy smiled and said, "Hi, Caleb!" He's a polished speaker, looking his audience in the eye and sounding like a student body president in the making with his cadence and ability to paint a picture. He closes his two-minute time with a nod and a reminder that the youth asked the city for a bit more. "It is a beginning to what I feel is needed — and thank you."

Caleb and 16-year-old Elizabeth Sampedro, who attends Churchill High, are the co-coordinators of Nuestro Lugar now that Terra Williams has aged out of LEAD's target range. Williams remains a volunteer and, until her schedule at LCC grew maddeningly busy last term, she was a paid intern for LEAD, working on the teen center specifically. But where does Nuestro Lugar get money for its operating costs? Well, like most nonprofit organizations, it runs on donations and grants. And Elizabeth, Caleb and many other teens bear their spokesperson roles well enough that powerful adults find themselves ready to donate more than they would have thought possible.

John Brown, the real estate broker and new EWEB board member who helped the teens interact with the city, remembers when he first heard about the idea of a teen center. He agreed to meet with the teens, but, he says, "I went to the meeting with preconceived notions: I'll kill this idea in a minute. But when I walked out an hour later, I said I'll find you a home and I'll write you a check." Why? "Have you met Caleb?" he asks. Caleb and Terra Williams "had a plan, were well-spoken and were organized," Brown says, and they were also "honest, from the heart."

When the city said no to the fire station, Brown was furious. "It pisses me off!" he says. "What other youth group isn't afraid of being 200 feet from the police station?" But Brown knows how to deal with reality, and when the Overpark space came open, he looked at the space and helped Nuestro Lugar find contractors who donated their work (John Critelli from Essex Construction and Ethan Hutchinson from Rainbow Valley Design and Construction, among others) and a carpet, donated by Imperial Floor, to warm up the space. One of the reasons Brown likes working with LEAD and Nuestro Lugar is that the whole group, including Executive Director Maj Rafferty, Nuestro Lugar Director D Cohen and two other adult staff members, runs on a shoestring budget, leveraging what they have into direct help for the teens. From REI and SportHill's clothing, equipment and time donations to FOOD for Lane County and Papa John's gifts of food for meetings, the teens get what they need. "They make do with what they have," Brown says admiringly.

That doesn't mean that the teens don't aspire to more. Terra Williams, who grew frustrated at the lack of academic counseling available to teens at Churchill Alternative, was grateful for Cohen's support in applying to LCC and the UO. She's looking forward to a program, now headed up by LEAD intern Teresa Montes, that will provide higher education counseling and