

Hi everyone, my name is Natalia Dorcely and I am a junior at Springfield High School here in Vt. At Springfield, we have a class called "Community Action". It's a project based learning class where last year our students worked to create a teen center for our community. We decided to join the class and make this happen because we wanted to create a safe space for kids to engage with their community in a healthy, safe, and fun way. We needed more options for ways to be in our world, more opportunities for ways to positively affect each other and our community.

Last year in class we visited teen centers around Vermont, New Hampshire and Massachusetts to gather data on how they run, their impact on youth and their community, and the best practices that they use to engage their teens. We heard that when youth have a safe and engaging space, drug use teen pregnancy and at risk behaviors decreased drastically. Teen centers can provide support, a listening ear, education and training, food, warmth, safety, fun, engagement and much more.

We opened the teen center, named The Space, in June of 2019. We have seen a big change in the age gap among the middle and high school students. We have seen an impact on the destructive behaviors in our schools. We have seen a difference in the climate of our classrooms. Certainly this is not solely because of the Space teen center but it is a part of the reason. We have kids hanging out regularly at the teen center and teens are learning about real world issues from teacher mentors and from each other. We have hosted multiple events that have been fun and engaging for both high school and middle schoolers during those critical after school and weekend hours. Events such as ice skating, haunted corn maze, in school contests and benefits, video tournaments and holiday celebrations. We are just beginning to tap the possibilities of what we want. We are working on workshops for cooking and food service workshops, resume and job practice, peer to peer listening and resource shares, restorative justice practices, food truck and sport events offerings, music and recording, summer part time work shares, internships, farm work and much more.

One of the biggest issues in Springfield is the separation between generations and different sectors of the community. We imagined the teen center to be a place to fill that age and social gap and help youth from all situations as well as seniors feel connected to their community through common events and activities.

When we started working to create a youth center in our town we were encouraged to not use the word teen or youth when we talked with prospective partners and community members. We were told that it might have a negative bias. We heard that youth are often dismissed for a lack of engagement, or attacked for being disruptive, selfish, lazy or not caring. We decided to not listen to that advice and in fact decided to put Youth and teen front and center in our discussions because the fact is we do care, we do want to be part of the solution, we are the experts on our lives and how best to improve them. So I ask you today to keep working from your place of power to engage all Vermonters including youth, Support us, listen to us, bring us to the table to be involved in the decisions that affect us all. We are the future.

Thank you for your time and we the youth of Vermont look forward to working with you all in the future.