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**PALM BEACH COUNTY NEWS**

# YMCA moving The LAB back to Boca campus from Town Center mall

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Oct 28, 2022



James Rodriguez, left, and teen participant Kyle will have a new space for teen programs and activities at the Peter Blum Family YMCA of Boca Raton. (YMCA of SPBC / Courtesy)

The YMCA of South Palm Beach County continues to make a commitment to teens. The YMCA is moving THE LAB, a teen center at Town Center at Boca Raton mall, to its campus at the Peter Blum Family YMCA of Boca Raton.

The YMCA of South Palm Beach County is in the process of the transition and construction, which will be completed by the first quarter of 2023.

Jason Hagensick serves as the president and CEO of the YMCA of South Palm Beach County. He said [THE LAB](#) was launched to impact teens, meet the community's needs and provide an opportunity for teens with a space of their own. The community responded with a significant increase in the number of teens attending over time.

Despite the lease coming to an end at THE LAB, the YMCA of South Palm Beach County was committed to implementing a plan to provide the same services on its Boca Raton campus as they repurpose administrative offices into a space to continue to deliver teen programs.

“From the day I got here, one of the things that I wanted to bring was a focus on teen programming,” Hagensick said. “The YMCA positively impacting teens was important to me and to mentor and teach kids to love learning. Teenagers want a place they want to go to, hang out, feel accepted and feel a sense of belonging. There is a benefit for teens getting involved in programs and activities and building relationships with others. There is a power of volunteering, supporting your community and engaging in activities that strengthen our community. The Y can help teens to be better people, leaders and role models, and I am thrilled.”

Hagensick said they want to continue to expand teen programs while teaching and exposing them to vocational opportunities, which includes film, technology and entrepreneurship.

“We will be very intentional and creative,” he said. “The programs and activities will be brought over and we valued everything we had there. I want to give them more opportunities to learn and experience new things. “THE LAB as it was previously did hold challenges to get there with transportation. We want to create space and programs the entire family can participate in. If one member of the family is participating in the program, there are other activities for the family members to do.”

Hagensick’s 14-year-old daughter is one of the teens who participates in the programs. She volunteers with the special needs program and is active at the Y.

“I truly appreciate the role the Y plays in helping me be a better dad,” Hagensick said. “My daughter is a better person through what she is doing at the YMCA.”



James Rodriguez, left, director of teen programming at the Peter Blum Family YMCA in Boca Raton, and teen participant Kyle discuss some of the leadership programs. (YMCA of SPBC / Courtesy)

James Rodriguez, who serves as the director of teen programming at the Peter Blum Family YMCA in Boca Raton, said teens are excited about the new space at the Y facility. They do not have to make a separate trip to the mall.

“Now that it’s here, the teens feel at home a lot more,” he said. “THE LAB was cool and amazing. It didn’t feel like the Y. We are able to see them more often now that the teens are in that space.”

The YMCA of South Palm Beach County had six teens attend the Blue Ridge Assembly Leaders Program in Black Mountain, North Carolina this past summer. The teens were able to learn about opportunities to become staff members within the YMCA, such as swim instructors, lifeguards, camp counselors and group leaders. The teens also have opportunities to volunteer and take on leadership roles by planning events and activities. They also have teens who volunteer with the youth board and their teen rally and teen summit.

“They pick up skills and knowledge and it will help them be a more well-rounded teenager,” Hagensick said. “They have a sense of value, purpose, belonging, responsibility and it builds their confidence.”

Kyle, a 10th-grader at SLAM Boca Raton, is one of the teens who credits the YMCA’s teen programs in changing his life. The openly gay teen was having trouble with self-acceptance before engaging with others at the Y in the last two years. He has made tremendous growth and attends the Y at least two times each week. He said he is able to express himself more and is having the time of his life.

“I met other teens my age that have gone through similar experiences that I did and made a bunch of new friends,” he said. “I learned a lot about the way I view things and how I can better myself. It’s such a safe space for me being able to come in and know I am loved no matter what.”

Kyle said he enjoys working out at the Y, which has helped him stay healthy and build higher self-esteem. As a member of the Leaders Club, he has volunteered his time to participate and assist in planning events, including Halloween at the Y, Healthy Kids Day and Breakfast with Santa.

Kyle attended the Blue Ridge Assembly Leaders Program in North Carolina this past summer. He was able to learn about leadership opportunities at the Y, disconnect and enjoy nature and new experiences such as hiking.



Teen participant Kyle takes part in some of the activities offered by the YMCA of South Palm Beach County. (YMCA of SPBC / Courtesy)

“My biggest takeaway was that it was a safe space for everyone to open up and talk about any issues whatever they may be,” he said. “I was able to meet all these new people and create friendships. I was able to really grow and learn about myself. I was vulnerable and when you are not masked behind anything to begin with, it will help create genuine friendships. It’s really eye-opening to travel on my own for an entire week and be able to take care of myself.”

Rodriguez, who also attended the YMCA Blue Ridge Assembly, said it was a great learning experience for the teens.

“Kyle roomed with people he never met before and it took a few days for him to settle in,” Rodriguez said. “It can be extremely overwhelming. He was having a difficult time and struggling to get acclimated. He got through it. He realized the choices belong to him. He was able to turn it around. He was able to engage and interact with others.”

Rodriguez, who has known Kyle since his start at the Y with the Leaders in Training summer developmental program, has noticed his transformation. Kyle has previously been recognized with the Leaders In Training of the Week Award.

“It depends on the teen who embraces it,” Rodriguez said. “I have seen the growth, development and initiative that was taken. He started to realize his actions actually matter and he can set an example for others and they will follow. He has stepped up not just as a participant and as a leader. He wants to now interact and work with the kids and he wants to be able to make an impact on the future. When they stay involved after the Leaders in Training program and roll into the Leaders Club, they take on that responsibility and care about themselves to want to serve and give back. They have never been in front of situations that they need to handle on their own. When they are volunteering and planning the events and they have to fix something, they are pushed to go figure it out. We give them that accountability.”

After struggling with self-acceptance, Kyle has been able to build a better relationship with his family and at school since joining the Y.

“My family has not always been there for the best support in some moments,” he said. “I have been able to accept myself truly and that has allowed them to accept me more. My home life has become better as a result. The response at school is a lot better. It’s great being able to know myself better. I feel less insecure. My self-esteem is so much better.”

Kyle said he enjoys taking on a leadership role at the Y and being a role model for the other teens.

“I am not the youngest anymore and I can give them advice on what I learned,” he said. “I have been there before and I can talk to them about how we handle situations. When dealing with conflict, I have a sense of maturity and improved the way I handle myself. I feel like it’s the best time of my life. It keeps getting better and better.”

The Peter Blum Family YMCA is at 6631 Palmetto Circle S, Boca Raton. Visit [ymcaspbc.org/thelab](http://ymcaspbc.org/thelab).