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JOHN MCCALL/SOUTH FLORIDA SUN SENTINEL

A BEAUTIFUL BLESSING

Dorothy Miller, left, has her dog, Mack, blessed by Charlene Wilkinson during the 24th annual Blessing of the Animals event at Unity Church of Delray Beach.

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YMCA's The LAB moves back to Boca Raton campus

By Alex Kushel
Sun Sentinel Correspondent

The YMCA of South Palm Beach County recently had a ribbon-cutting ceremony for its grand reopening of The LAB to provide a space for teen programs at the Peter Blum Family YMCA of Boca Raton.

The LAB provides an opportunity for teens to be involved in various programs. The teen center has a lounge space for social interaction, club meetings, movie night and other activities to engage with each other. They have a dedicated room for egaming, which includes several computers and screens. They also have a makerspace, a spacious area with desks for teens to learn from instructors, complete homework, utilize 3D printing and participate in arts and crafts and additional hands-on activities.

The teen center was previously at the Town Center at Boca Raton mall



The YMCA of South Palm Beach County had a ribbon-cutting ceremony for its grand reopening of The LAB at the Peter Blum Family YMCA of Boca Raton. **CARLOS ARISTIZABAL/COURTESY**

before the end of its lease. The Peter Blum Family YMCA of Boca Raton has transformed as administrative offices were repurposed

to construct the new space for teens.

"I have a pretty big imagination and from a space standpoint, this meets my

expectations," said Jason Hagensick, president and CEO of the YMCA of South Palm Beach County. "At the end of the day, it's what you do within the space. It's wonderful to have a great place for kids to hang out and be part of a community themselves. I want this space to be a home for teens."

Hagensick added the goal is to continue to expand teen programming.

"I am not going to be happy until we are doing leadership, civic engagement, career readiness and workforce development programs seven days a week," he said. "We are not going to stop until we achieve that. The impact the Y is having on my daughter and young teenagers here is beyond measure. The impact of having a place such as the YMCA, The LAB, caring staff and volunteers is just absolutely incredible and it's only going to help kids thrive as they get older."

Hagensick said the YMCA of South Palm Beach County is a place to meet the community's needs where all families can join together.

"I take tremendous pride in the fact that I am just here for the period of time that I get to have the keys," he said. "People have been supporting this YMCA for more than 50 years. What I love most is the vision for impacting kids, children, families and the community all started long before me. The best part of a career with the YMCA is the people you get to work with and build relationships and friendships with. Just seeing the incredible amount of support we are getting says our YMCA means something in the community. The work we are doing is noticed by those key stakeholders that believe in the community, the YMCA and serving kids. It's pretty special."

James Rodriguez, who is the director of teen programming at the Peter Blum Family YMCA in Boca Raton, said The LAB is available to teens from 3 to 8 p.m. on weekdays and noon to 6 p.m. on Saturdays.

"Egaming is where you can meet people with like-minded interests, socialize and engage with each other and play video games," he said. "The teens feel comfortable in this environment. The lounge has couches to relax, talk to each other and it's where meetings are held. We also have a space for teens to complete homework and for activities. It's really been awesome and very exciting and cool to see."

The Y also has teens who participate in the leaders club as they meet once each week to grow their social and leadership skills. They plan events, engage with each other in activities and discuss their highs and lows of what they went through during the week.

"The YMCA has really become a second home for me, especially the leaders club as a second family," said Valentina Messiha, who attends Olympic Heights High School in Boca Raton. "The YMCA is somewhere I

can be myself and teach kids how to grow. I think parents should bring teens here because when I came to the Y, I was lost at first. I found out I can be myself and I can be vulnerable. Everyone is understanding and you're not judged here. We have more people this year and to see it has expanded is so surreal and it makes me feel really amazing."

Cooper Langley, who attends Spanish River High School in Boca Raton, is a member of the leaders club. He also participated during the leader-in-training program this past summer.

"As a leader in training, I was able to help out the counselors and hang out with the kids during the summer camp," he said. "It's a lot of fun and I had a lot of volunteer hours in the community. The leaders club is a safe space and it's where you can build your skills."

Sophia Cruz, who attends Boca Raton High School, said she enjoys the leaders club and interacting with other teens at events.

"The YMCA gives teens a really good opportunity to get out there to learn how to do things in the real world and to do something that you would never be able to do," she said. "I get to work and bond with the other kids."

Bianca Tavares, who is homeschooled, said that the leaders club allows teens to be able to open up.

"I know teens can feel they do not have anywhere to go," she said. "They're sometimes coming from broken families. If people feel like they can't express their emotions, it can hurt them. There is no judgment here. It's really important to trust your emotions because it will be so much better."

The YMCA of South Palm Beach County also encompasses the Devos-Blum Family YMCA of Boynton Beach.

Visit ymcaspb.org/thelab.

NO EXIT

No Exit is a one-act philosophical drama. The play is adapted from the French by Paul Bowles and proposes that "hell is other people" rather than a state created by God. This classic French play follows three strangers that are trapped in the afterlife.

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