

ACTIVITIES FOR YOUTH

As hundreds of young couples came to Niles following World War II, thousands of young children soon went off to school a few years later and elementary school enrollment dramatically increased. A few years later, high school enrollments reflected the same pattern.

In the literature available on the history of Niles, the term "youth" in Niles seems to always refer to anyone older than 13 and younger than 20. The older age may have been somewhat more flexible because the legal age to drink alcoholic beverages in Niles was raised from 19 to 21 in 1978.

The legal framework for a Howard R. Heinze Youth Center and Foundation was announced in April 1955. It was a non-profit organization and the initial projects for the center were for a library and a gymnasium. The women's division of the foundation sold raffle books and \$3,026 was raised.

Teen dances were already being conducted in the Grennan Heights field house. The Niles Park District was organized and they also were hosting activities for teens. On September 27, 1956, *The Niles Spectator* reported that a Niles Teen-Age Dance club was organized and had 169 members.

Early in October 1956, the formation of a Niles Teen Council was announced. On October 25, 23 teens and 23 adults formed the nucleus of this council. William F. Jackson was president, Jack Meier was vice president and Barbara Berg was secretary-treasurer. Two teens were also to be appointed as other officers.

No record of Niles Teen Council activities can be found until late 1957. Connie Brodzik and Saran Schulz were to represent teens on the council and Judy Vosmic was named chairman for the group's first dance at the Bunker Hill Country Club, April 11, 1958.

Several churches hosted dances for teens during the late 1950s and Claude Grannas, minister at the Niles Bible Church, initiated a group encouraging the formation of a Young People's Fellowship. The Niles Community Church also conducted programs for and about youth; in 1964 a youth fellowship, the "Niners," began meeting at the church. St. John Brebeuf sponsored regular dances in its gym beginning in 1964.

In June 1962, Niles Mayor Nicholas Blase recommended the forming of a Niles Youth Commission. The Niles Youth Organization had a dance at Bunker Hill Country Club, December 28, 1962. The Niles Youth Commission was formed in the spring of 1963. Its original purpose was to assist youth in locating employment during the months of summer vacation. John Herley was chairman. Tentative plans were also made for a theatre presentation.

On August 23, 24, 1963, "Stage Struck" was the feature attraction at the Lawrencewood Shopping Center produced and performed by the Niles Youth Commission. In attendance were 600 guests. The performances were acclaimed to be a success. There was an outing to see the White Sox play baseball. A Frankie Avalon Dance Party was sponsored October 12. To wrap up the year, the youth conducted a Christmas toy drive and put on a Christmas production, "Many Moons."

The public was invited to a forum in May 1964 that would be conducted by the Niles Youth Commission. Commissioners heard expressions of the need for a program to aid youth in locating summer employment. A job assistance program was set up. Bernard Will, Robert Tietz, John Herley, and Michael Provenzano were youth commissioners at that time. Jacqueline Bolek and Paul Niesen were selected as the Niles Days Queen and King for 1964.

The Niles Youth Commission organized the Niles Little Theatre. The first production was "Cheaper by the Dozen." It was staged August 29 and 30, 1964. Teens were invited to participate in a talent show November 19, 1964. Prizes of \$100, \$50, and \$25 would be awarded.

The necessity for a teen center was discussed in January 1965. The Howard R. Heinze fund, which was available to build such a center 10 years earlier, had contributed all monies it had raised for this purpose to the Leaning Tower YMCA. The Niles American Legion Post 29 expressed support of a Niles Teen Center in November 1965. As part of the All-America City festivities, an essay contest for youth was conducted. Robert Raccuglia of St. John Brebeuf won a 10-day trip to Washington and was Niles' mayor for a day. The essay topic was "Why my parents should vote whenever given the opportunity." The contest proved to be popular for several years. Future winners, all of whom became mayor of Niles for a day and won prizes were: 1967, Dennis Wieszcholek; 1968, Christopher Bednarowicz; 1969, William Kemp; 1970, Caren Grantz; 1971, Michael Krok; 1973, Barbara Buck; 1974, Kevin Boyle; 1975, Bryan Walk; 1978, Barbara Daehler; and 1980, Glen Capek.

The Niles American Legion Post 29 continued to support a youth center during 1966 and said it had located a suitable site. "The Attic," a new teen club, was sponsored by the Niles Park District. Fred Davis was president. Other officers of "The Attic" were Stan Luszowiak, vice president; Barney Balasa, treasurer; Sue Kramer, recording secretary; Elaine Meyer, corresponding secretary; and Ray Peterson, sgt-at-arms. The club had a dance at the recreation center, October 22, 1966. It was announced there were to be two monthly dances beginning in December, a game room would be provided and a social club would be organized. At its December 7, 1966 meeting, Niles youth commissioners reported that a survey was taken and 900 respondents expressed an interest in building a teen center. Dances were the favorite activity of teens, with interest in roller skating and bowling also expressed. Surprisingly, teens favored having dances in a church setting rather than commercial or other settings. A week after this meeting, the Niles Days Committee awarded \$7,700 to the Niles Youth Center Committee.

A teen dance was scheduled for January 15, 1966, at Notre Dame High School. It was to pay tribute to a popular teen, Pete DiMaria, president of the Niles theatre group. Pete died in the late summer of 1965. The dance was planned to raise \$1,500 toward an altar at St. John Brebeuf Church as a memorial in Pete's name. More than 1,000 attended, paying 75 cents per ticket. Two Niles combo groups, "The Tempos" and "The Boycotts," donated their services. By 10:00 p.m. word got around at the dance, as *The Niles Bugle* reported, that the goal had been achieved. Everyone agreed the youngsters were very well-behaved.

The New Youth Center was scheduled to open with a "Grand Dance," January 14, 1967, at the Lawrencewood Shopping Center. Teens selected "The Crib" as the name for the center. Another dance was set for February 3. Linda Schwarze was appointed as adult supervisor for the center. Todd Bavaro resigned as chairman of the Niles Youth Commission and was given an award by the Niles Youth Commission for his work on behalf of the youth of Niles. Bill Sterling was appointed as the new chairman. In October 1967 "The Crib" was closed.

Confusion developed because conflicting reports circulated as to the relationship between the Niles Youth Center and the Niles Youth Commission. There were questions whether the money from Niles Days was awarded to American Legion Post 29 for a site for the Niles Youth Center or

directly to the Niles Youth Center. Apparently some \$4,000 was committed for operation and rental of "The Crib." Additional funds were "pledged" from the coming Niles Days, but some began to question whether a shopping center was the best location for a teen center.

The First Youth Congress in Niles was called to meet at the village council chamber, November 21, 1967. An open forum would discuss creating a "hot line" between youth and their peers. Others also expressed concern about job openings for teens.

Niles was Host City for the Illinois Junior Miss Pageant in December 1967. Diane Power was Niles' entry into the competition. In 1968 Stanley Sekulow was appointed chairman for the Illinois Junior Miss Pageant along with an 11-member board. Mary Siwek was selected to represent Niles. After the second pageant, Niles elected not to host future Illinois Junior Miss Pageants. However, they did continue to select representatives to attend the pageants in other cities. In 1969, Laura Kotsiris was the Niles Junior Miss; in 1970 Maureen Quinlan was the Niles Junior Miss; and in 1971 Patricia Fornall was the Junior Miss representing Niles.

The Niles Youth Congress formed a chorus and sang a Christmas program at St. Benedict's Home in 1967. The village board began taking a more active interest in the activities of the Niles Youth Commission, heard reports of their activities, and approved several proposals suggested by the commission. In May 1968 the Niles Youth Congress collected 31,000 pounds of scrap newspapers. Proceeds were used to present the Village of Niles with a state of Illinois flag. A Niles Talent Show was co-sponsored by the Niles Youth Commission and the Niles Little Theatre Group. "The Mist," a ballroom band, won first place at the show, May 19, 1968.

A second meeting of the Niles Youth Congress was called for November 1968. Nick Bavaro served as chairman for the meeting. Softball tournaments and talent shows would continue to be sponsored by the commission. Interest in softball increased. A Niles Youth Congress Softball League was launched and marathon games, lasting for 53-54 hours, were a "huge success." Money was raised by the softball marathons. In 1972, \$1,775 was donated to help in preventing muscular dystrophy. In 1974 funds were raised for the Julia Malloy Education Center in Niles.

In 1973 the Niles Park District opened a recreation center and organized some teen activities. With the opening of the Trident Center, more facilities were made available than could be utilized at the recreation center. The weekend dances for teens proved to be popular. However, concerns about all the activities taking place in the surrounding areas with many teens now driving their own cars, resulted in termination of teen dances at the Trident Center. A coffee shop for teens was opened in 1973 at 7401 Oakton Street thanks to the assistance of Rev. Michael Youngblood of the Niles Community Church and Niles Family Service.

One important function of the Niles Youth Commission was assisting teens get jobs. In its first 15 years, some 550 jobs were procured for those between 13 and 19; a year later an additional 400 teens got jobs as a result of leads from the commission, and by 1979 it was estimated a total of 1,750 were placed, thanks to the Niles Youth Commission.

The largest, or more accurately, best-attended, teen event in Niles was March 4, 1978, at the Axle Roller Rink, 9840 N. Milwaukee Avenue. A crowd of 2,500 came out to listen to John Landecker, WLS disc jockey, spin the platters for Niles' own version of Saturday Night Fever.

In 1980, "The Junction" was opened in the Ballard School gym. It was a summer center designed to provide activities for junior high school students.

A generation of "youth" had made its presence known in Niles between 1950 and 1980. After reviewing newspaper accounts of the entire period--few other records are available--one is

struck with the amount of effort and concern adults expressed to ensure that teens would not "get into trouble." No major disturbance was caused by teens during this entire period. After reading about dozens of dances, never was a word mentioned about teen drinking during the dances. Adults "permitted," then regretted, allowing teens to smoke at dances and in game rooms. Adults, while providing use of an auto with increased regularity over the years, objected to use of the Lawrencewood shopping mall for a teen center because public transportation was not readily available. Unfortunately, it was teens using the auto while drinking that caused Niles to raise the age for legal drinking of alcoholic beverages from 19 to 21.

Those professional prognosticators who projected a population of 50,000 in Niles by the year 2000 probably did not ask the teens of Niles if they had any strong attachments to remaining in Niles. After decreasing for more than a decade, school enrollments in the area, since the mid-1990s, are slowly starting to rise. Perhaps another generation, as vital and dynamic as the post World War II generation that moved into Niles with such great expectations, is preparing to make a similar move. As 1997 drew to a close, consideration was being given to establishing a teen center at the Trident Center after the Human Services Department would relocate next to the village hall in the Civic Center Plaza.■