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Tales from the Trenches

At our **Drop-In** program this year, we have had record high attendance allowing us to build relationships with a wide range of students. On a Tuesday or Thursday Drop-In, we are averaging 80 + students. We are so grateful to be able to get to know these students and provide a place for them to feel safe, loved, and valued. Not only



have we, as staff, been able to build meaningful relationships with students, but so too have high school students with middle schoolers. For example, we have a group of high school boys who have taken a leadership role in the gym. These students do a great job of organizing basketball games and making everyone feel welcome to participate. It has been so wonderful to see how much the middle school boys appreciate and look forward to playing basketball with the high schoolers.



In our **Bridge to Excellence** program, students are paired with mentors to work on homework, play games, and most importantly, build relationships. Throughout the years, we have seen meaningful connections form out of this program. A relationship that we love to highlight when talking about this program, is between a now high schooler and his mentor. The student started here in 6th grade and has built a relationship with his mentor that we have no doubt will last for years to come. Both his mentor and himself have faced multiple personal challenges throughout their years together. They have been able to be a support system for each other and have built an amazing friendship. His mentor was so influential to him, that he decided to become a mentor himself! We now get to see him thrive as he helps younger kids here at The Bridge. The program requires commitment and consistent attendance to build relationships, gain trust and make real differences. This year we are averaging 1.3 students to each mentor. This is a phenomenal relationship ratio that makes real differences.



Our **Skills for Life** program takes high school students on career trips throughout the area. The goal is to introduce kids to career opportunities that may or may not require a college degree. The goal is to give kids first hand experiences with local employers and get a better understanding of opportunities after high school. This summer we will be touring, Western Michigan Aviation, Tenant, Request Foods, Zeeland Farm Services, Gentex Corporation, Walters Gardens and the Zeeland Board of Public works..

More Program Updates

In collaboration with the Holland Area Arts Council, students in **Expression** are able to communicate their emotions, thoughts, and opinions through art.



This year, students completed two art projects. One of these projects involved making paper-mache hot air balloons. Students enjoyed the process of being able to create a unique hot air balloon, all while engaging in conversation and building community with each other. Now, all of the hot air balloons are hanging in the couch room at The Bridge!

Not only did students have lots of fun creating this project, but these balloons also serve as a reminder to us that while life's challenges drag us down, we can rise above our struggles to find beauty and positivity in any situation.

For our **Food for Thought** program, we partner with Second Reformed Church to teach kids how to cook simple and easy meals. This year, our students were even able to take the knowledge they have learned through this program and teach students at Roosevelt Elementary! The Bridge kids met with the younger students and helped them read recipes, measure ingredients, and answer any questions they had. It was amazing to see the Bridge kids step into a leadership role as they interacted



with the elementary students.

Partnering with Empowering Youth Global Connections (EYGC), **Building Bridges Together**, is a program that gives students the opportunity to learn about other cultures through presentations, food, music, and crafts. Each student in the program is paired with a pen pal from Kenya. Students and their pen pals have been able to write letters

back and forth so that they can better understand each other and the cultures from which they come.

When students received pictures of their pen pals, it sparked meaningful conversations about our lives here in the US compared to the lives of students in Kenya. Throughout



this pen pal program, students have been able to correspond with kids and learn the value of different perspectives. They learned about cultures, traditions, and perspectives other than their own. Students also had the opportunity this year to make angels and notes that were sent to people in Ukraine. Students were able to engage with this craft in meaningful ways, including learning how to write simple phrases in Ukrainian to encourage those who would receive their messages.

Our **It's Amazing** program meets every Wednesday evening from 5 to 7pm. The group is focused on deeper connections spiritually and with their community. Throughout the program year, the group visits local seniors in their homes or at Royal Park to build relationships, hear stories and develop prayer partnerships. We can not thank these seniors



enough for their incredible influence in the lives of these kids. Special thanks to Bethel CRC and First CRC for providing church families to lean on throughout the year.

Challenges and Concerns

Along with all the positives and great things happening, there are also reminders of the reason we are here.

Student anxiety and depression is on the rise. The reality for high school students is that too many are packing their academic schedules with every AP class imaginable while participating in multiple after school activities and trying to work on the side. While this is admira-



ble, the pressures they feel to excel at all aspects of that schedule is overwhelming for them. The fear of failure is the unspoken demon kids are facing today. At some point, a mental health breakdown occurs that often results in harming themselves or worse. Please pray for peace and a release of the pressure to be perfect in a world so imperfect. Pray also that they may



feel surrounded by a community that wants them to feel safe, loved, and valued.

Recently, we received an opportunity to expand our programming and provide more for kids, families and our community. Our founder, First Christian Reformed Church provided us a letter asking for a proposal for the use of First CRC's property and assets. We can not express enough gratitude for the 23 years of support given by the members of First CRC. We pray for the church leaders who will be disseminating the mounting proposals and for the members of the congregation as they process what this all means for them.

Most are not aware that we rent The Bridge from First CRC and operate 7am to 6pm M-F. We are a separate 501c3 non-profit, but believe the mission started by First CRC continues to be lived



out everyday through the Bridge Youth Center. Thanks to our supportive community of schools, the city, over 20 churches, 110 area businesses, hundreds of individuals, grants and foundations, support for the Bridge has never been higher. In 2023-2024 we have served more kids than we have in my 18 years of leadership. We continue to work diligently to build relationships, gain trust and make differences in kids throughout our community. In so doing, The Bridge has become a neces-

sary component for families as they balance school, work and afterschool demands.



We believe God has a long term plan for us in the core of Zeeland's downtown. We also believe we can make a greater impact in our community by partnering with folks who share our vision.

We are seeking input from community leaders, neighbors, churches, schools and city leaders to gain input and support in how we can best support our community needs. Some initial feed back involves:

- A place for seniors to gather during the day and provide intergenerational ministry every afternoon.
- A place where a community of multi-ministry support can build relationships, gain trust and make real differences.
- Food and meal distribution
- Added availability for families and recreation

It is our intend to make a proposal that will allow us to remain at our current site and continue to serve the kids and residents of the Zeeland community.

If you have questions, thoughts or words of encouragement, please contact me at jed.mulder@bymczeeland.org.



Ways to Get Involved

The Bridge Youth Center Staff

Jed Mulder

Executive Director

Scott Baumgartner

Youth Development

Coordinator

Nycole Kragt

Mentoring Support

Fred Louis

School and Mentoring

Jill Mulder

Volunteer Coordinator

Hannah VanderGeld

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1). Volunteer

Food donations

Mentors

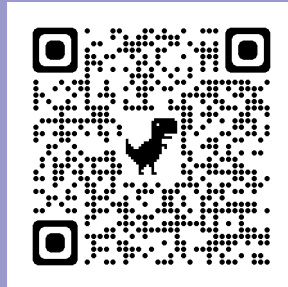
Drop-In Volunteers

To get involved, visit www.bymczeeland.org/volunteer

2). Provide your e-mail to receive an E-copy of the newsletter and a weekly list of student prayer concerns. Use the link or scan the QR code to update your email information:

Link: <https://forms.gle/6T9RFueg89kqaNK18>

QR Code:



3). Donate

Check—Mail check to 210 E Main, Zeeland, MI 49464

On-Line -www.bymczeeland.org/donate

Venmo—NEW OPTION—

Estate Planning—talk with your financial planner about including us in your long term planning

QR Code for donating online:

