

Youth group seeks to spark change

STORY AND PHOTOS
BY ALLISON RUEF

The Youth Economic Group welcomes the community to their new home base, Spark in Liberty

What began in the sheltering basement of the Liberty First Presbyterian Church nearly five years ago as a small group of high school students searching for a path to a positive future, has grown into an organized, empowered business enterprise and leadership collective.

On January 11, The Youth Economic Group, or YEG, welcomed the community to its new home-base, Spark. Located in the parsonage of the Liberty United Methodist Church at 172 North Main Street in Liberty, the building provides much-needed space and a front-parlor boutique for their business, Basement Bags.

PERMANENT HOME?

The center was named Spark by YEG members, who want it to be a "spark for change in Sullivan County." This is the group's fourth and hopefully final move, and thanks to Liberty Methodist Church Pastor Bridgette LeConey and her predecessor Pastor Bob Kersten, Spark will provide plenty of space for the group's continued growth.

"As a congregation, we were looking to do something with youth on a local level, and when we heard that YEG was looking for a space, we knew we had found it," says LeConey. "When our ideas match God's plans, they reveal themselves as serendipity."

While serendipity has certainly played a role in some of YEG's success, a lot of it comes from careful planning, self-determination and the guidance of the Rural & Migrant Ministry, a non-sectarian statewide not-for-profit that serves rural and migrant communities.

Youth empowerment programs are a central part of their mission and the

progress of YEG in Sullivan County since it began in 2011 is a source of pride for the organization.

"Creating opportunities and change for rural youth is difficult at best," explained Sandra Cuellar Oxford, President of the Sullivan County NAACP and the mother of a YEG alumnus. "The innovation and program developed by YEG in Sullivan County could very well serve as a model for other rural community groups around the state. That's huge."

ABOUT THE GROUP

So what is YEG? They are a group of 10 high school students from Fallsburg, Liberty and Monticello who meet weekly to discuss issues of social importance to their lives and plan solutions together. Membership is selective, and those desiring to be a part of this group must not only apply, but serve an apprenticeship before becoming a member.

Once they outgrow the program – by graduating – they become alumni who continue to play an active role in the group.

But perhaps what YEG is "famous" for is their cottage industry, a line of custom tote bags named for their humble beginnings: Basement Bags.

The bags, which feature the designs of YEG members and contain socially conscious, inspiring messages, are sourced from a women's cooperative in New Hampshire. They are then hand dyed then silk-screened by the YEG members. The commercial press they use to

make the bags is a result of their success – the hobby press donated to them at the start of the project couldn't handle the output any more.

Through fundraising efforts, the new silkscreen press was purchased and has increased both their quantity and quality. They've also expanded into tee-shirts, named "Feel-Good Tees," both of which can be purchased by contacting the group or visiting Floyd & Bobo's Cafe down the road at 98 No. Main St. The goal is to soon have public hours at the Spark boutique, located at the front of the building on Main Street.

LATINO OUTREACH

The wealth of space also allows the Rural & Migrant Ministry to do things they hadn't previously been able to do, like welcome visiting delegations and provide them with lodging; have a design and production room for the bags and tees and, most recently, the formation of the "Workers' Group," and Worker Education Center for adult migrant workers in Sullivan County's food industry.

The goal of the Workers' Group is to develop leadership and identify major issues and concerns within Sullivan County's growing Latino communities. "As Sullivan County grows, so will this industry," said 24-year-old Heriberto Gonzalez, the group's leader. "Sometimes you live in a place and don't even know your neighbor. We want to change that and let those in the Latino community know they are not alone."

The group hopes to help provide ESL (English as a second language) support to bridge language barriers; help navigate the political, educational and other bureaucratic systems and help unite the many Latino cultures that live here.

Hispanics make up 14.4



YEG members, apprentices, alumni and coordinators gathered to celebrate the opening of their new home base, Spark. Front, Jessica Houff (outgoing brethren volunteer), left, and Andrea Keller (incoming brethren volunteer). Middle row, from left: Thalia Lucas (alumna), Joel Aguilar (alumnus), Irais Leon (Liberty) and Olav Peterson Langeland (Woodbourne). Back row, from left: Shivani Patel (Liberty), Kaday Sesay (South Fallsburg), Tatiana Quintanilla (Liberty), Tony Caballero (Monticello), Diavian Smith (South Fallsburg), Desmond Oxford (alumnus), Kai Jackson (alumnus), Danny Lang (YEG founder and alumnus).



Matt Helmick explores the Spark boutique.



The YEG headquarters, named "Spark," is housed in the parsonage (at right) of the Liberty Methodist Church, visible at left.

percent of the population in Sullivan County, according to 2013 US Census estimates, up from 2010's 13.6 percent. "The Latino population is growing here and we want to help," said Gonzalez.

In addition to opening its doors, YEG welcomed new full-time coordinator Dawn Hurley and said an emotional goodbye to Brethren Service Volunteer Jessica Houff, who served as YEG fellow and business coordinator for the past year.

Board member Harriet Sandmeier presented the

group with an anonymous gift from a member of her church as well as a donation from the congregation itself. "I cover a church in Dutchess County," said Sandmeier, a Presbyterian Lay Pastor, "and we encourage our members to be supportive of the migrant community."

THE FUTURE

What's next for YEG? More of the same – youth empowerment, education, spreading awareness of social justice issues, growing Base-

ment Bags and Feel-Good

Tees and creating leaders for tomorrow. "YEG gives young adults the tools to make a difference in their lives, the lives of the people they care about and ultimately contribute to making positive changes in communities they live in," said Oxford. "As a parent and family of two alums of the Youth Economic Program I am so proud they have had the determination and vision to breathe life into their dreams and goals for the program here in Sullivan County."