

Friday October 21, 2011

GREAT BARRINGTON -- Railroad Street Youth Project has long been hailed for its efforts to empower local youths. Now it has a headquarters with an image to match its reputation.

The nonprofit organization held an open house on Thursday to show off \$125,000 in improvements made to its Bridge Street drop-in center. What once was a drab shell, organizers say, is now an inviting space that has only increased its presence among area teens.

"It's unbelievable," said executive director Brenda Barlow. "It's a game changer; kids are coming in droves."

The brightly colored space now boasts an inviting communal space, a row of computers and a host of needed infrastructure improvements.

Eric Bruun has been involved with Railroad Street since its inception nearly 12 years ago. A member of the board of directors, Bruun remembers what the space looked like four years ago when they relocated to Bridge Street and said the makeover provides a space to match the work being done there.

"It's astonishing," said Bruun. "It's gone from drab and tired to colorful and exciting."

Efforts to refurbish the space began last year, even though organizers never expected they could do much with their shoe-string budget. But then the improvements came, and they came from an unexpected source.

Barlow contacted DaVita, a Denver-based dialysis provider, after she was informed of the company's annual bike tour to promote kidney disease awareness and donate to community based organizations.

DaVita agreed to come to Great Barrington to kick off its tour last September, donating \$50,000 for infrastructure improvements and bringing in 150 employees to refurbish the space. DaVita also was able to raise \$75,000 for furniture, computers and even a pinball machine.

"We were just stunned by their generosity," said Brian Tobin, Railroad Street board chairman. "We never would have been able to do this on our own; we just didn't have the money for it."

Caleb King, a local teen involved with Railroad Street, said the upgrades have piqued the interest of a diverse group of his peers. But more importantly, he said, it has allowed them to take advantage of the constructive opportunities the organization provides.

To reach Trevor Jones:  
[tjones@berkshireagle.com](mailto:tjones@berkshireagle.com),  
or (413) 496-6204.