

## Youth Center Celebrates Year of Progress

**One year later, Herndon residents still strive to provide after-school alternatives for area youth.**

[By Scott J. Krischke](#)

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The Herndon Youth Safe Haven Center, located in the Park Ridge Garden Apartments of Herndon, is a place where local students can come after school to get help with their homework, play computer games or learn life skills.

Students can come for positive reinforcement and to work with adult role models.

"My younger [students] are off the bus, running here," said Vanessa Murphy, the full-time coordinator of the Safe Haven Youth Center and lifelong non-profit worker. "They really depend on this program."

They have depended on the program now for a full year, as the Youth Safe Haven Center, celebrated its first anniversary last Friday since opening its doors as an effort to provide alternatives to gangs.

The center, which is primarily funded by a grant from The Eisenhower Foundation, is operated as a branch of the local Herndon non-profit organization, Vecinos Unidos [United Neighbors], a group that has provided local Herndon youth with services ranging from after-school sports programs to tutoring centers for the past 11 years. The Herndon Youth Safe Haven Center is one of approximately eight others that the Eisenhower Foundation supports through federal grants from the Department of Justice.

"After school, the kids don't have a lot to do in this area, and their parents don't want them to go far away," said Ross Deem, president of Vecinos Unidos. "This is great because it's keeping them out of trouble ... it gives them something [to do]."

THE HERNDON YOUTH Safe Haven Center is built into a



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Joseph Colgan, 6, focuses all his attention to the strategy computer game that he is playing at the Herndon Youth Safe Haven Center as assistant instructor Katie Canatsey joins in the games of other students. The center gives children a place to go after school for homework help and supervised activities as a way of keeping them out of trouble and reinforcing positive values.



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Herndon Youth Safe Haven Center coordinator Vanessa Murphy assists Luis Batres, 9, with his history homework. Batres, a regular at the center, immigrated to the United States with his family from El Salvador when he was 6-years-old.

ground level apartment unit at the Park Ridge Garden Apartments and features eight computers — all with internet access — several large tables to do homework on, and a range of rewards like candy and juice for students who bring in good test grades and exhibit model behavior.

The children, who attend the after-school program from 2:30 p.m. until 6 p.m. every weekday, are also given presentations on topics like being good citizens, treating others with respect and exercising good personal hygiene.

It is especially helpful for the sons and daughters of immigrants, Murphy said, saying that they are often held at a disadvantage when looking to their non-English speaking parents for help on their homework.

Murphy is not alone in her job to give her children positive examples. Aside from the aid local volunteers and the assistance of part-time worker Katie Canatsey, Herndon Police Officer Warren G. Brathwaite comes in to work and talk with students two to three times a week, according to Murphy.

"[Officer Brathwaite] has a great connection with the kids, he's a really great role model," she said.

THE BEST EXAMPLES of community programs such as the Herndon Youth Safe Haven Center is seen directly in the communities, according to former Town Council member and current Purcellville police chief Darryl C. Smith, a founding member of Vecinos Unidos.

"The most inspiring thing to me is when you see the people who were in your soccer program volunteering at polling places, really making a positive difference in the community," Smith said. "I'm sure that their teachers are witnessing the difference as well."

For now, the center's main goals lie in improving the quality of their after-school program, giving their young students better presentations and increasing the number of people who are involved, according to Murphy.

"I want to see the program grow and see other communities in Herndon benefit from this," she said.

"It's mainly for the children to see that there are people in their community who are here for them, care for them and want the best for them."