

## New in Poinciana



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*News-Gazette Photos/Andrew Sullivan*

Gustavo Costas, 15, and Alanis Costas, 12, team up in a game of foosball at the recently-opened Boys and Girls Clubs Poinciana Teen Center.

**By Fallan Patterson**

Staff Writer

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Jorge Martinez knew he was heading down the wrong life path. Struggling with social acceptance at Haines City High School, the 17-year-old dropped out, spending the past year watching television and gaining weight.

"I didn't feel right in high school, in my surroundings," Martinez said. "I kind of gave up on myself."

Martinez's youth leader at Hosanna Church told him and his mother, Aurea Santiago, about the recently opened Boys and Girls Clubs Poinciana Teen Center. The young man will now spend his days working in the computer lab on Virtual School in hopes of earning either his diploma or GED.

"I saw the sky was open; I can't explain," Santiago said about her son's second chance. "I know he'll start in a good place; now I'm in a comfortable place."

The Association of Poinciana Villages is putting stock into its children, financing a new football field at Vance Harmon Park for the Poinciana

Predators youth football league and partnering with Boys and Girls Clubs of Central Florida to open the teen center.

After last summer's Youth in Crisis Conference at Osceola Heritage Park, which brought together community leaders to brainstorm about issues troubling Osceola County juveniles, officials in Poinciana vowed to protect their youngsters.

"We walked away from (the conference) saying, 'What could we do?'" Jeanette Coughenour, media co-chair of the association, said.

The solution wasn't to just focus on the athletically-inclined but any teenagers in the community who need a place to do homework, meet new friends and stay out of trouble, she said.

Association leaders reached out to Boys and Girls Clubs late last year, offering the building, including funds for renovations, and financing for the first three years if the youth organization would run the teen center.

The teen center, at 2190 S. Marigold Ave., replaced the inside of an empty 24,000-square-foot building just over the Osceola County line in Polk County that the association had vacated four years ago.

"We've looked for opportunities for years to have a presence in Poinciana," Mack Reid, director of operations for the Boys and Girls Clubs, said. "APV providing the operating funds was key. Without them, we wouldn't be able to bring our programs and services to this part of Kissimmee."

The center's biggest challenge, according to Reid, is transportation for athletic and educational field trips.

Renovation of the teen center cost \$52,000, which consisted of knocking down walls, painting and replacing the old flooring, Reid said.

Operating expenses for the program, which can accommodate up to 50 teens between 12 and 18 years old, is \$172,489 for 2011, Coughenour said.

"It gives our teens a place to go," she said, adding students from both Osceola and Polk County schools are eligible to attend.

Filled with a computer lab and quiet space for homework and tutoring, a living room-type area for watching movies and a game room for caroming balls around a billiard table or developing a strategy for beating opponents at foosball, the center offers an alternative for teens who may not have had anywhere else to go.

The teen center, which opened July 18, currently has 12 members, Boys and Girls Clubs of Central Florida spokeswoman Tina Ashe said.



Jorge Martinez, 17, is one of several local teens making use of the center.

The teen center also created jobs in the community, with four employees new to the organization, including Opal Walker-Warren, operating director for the teen center.

Walker-Warren is recruiting hard in anticipation of the school year, visiting area schools, churches and organizations to educate parents and teenagers about the center.

"I'd love to have a waiting list," she said, adding that her next step is attending middle and high schools open houses next week to pass out applications.

The teen center, which will offer an after-school program once school begins Aug. 22, is open 2-8 p.m. Monday through Friday.

"We wanted to be available and accessible for when the teens need us the most," Reid said. "We recognize the need for a positive youth program here."

For Martinez, the center offers more than just a place to hang out or meet new friends.

"When I came here, I felt peaceful. It made me happy," he said.

Boys and Girls Clubs of Central Florida is still interested in expanding its operations into Osceola County, Reid said, adding that both St. Cloud and Celebration lack clubs and the Buenaventura Lakes club needs its own facility; it currently operates out of a county-owned building.

#### New football field

The association also spent \$88,000 installing benches and an electronic scoreboard for a new football field for the Poinciana Predators, the youth football league that hosts children from Pee-wee football up to tackle, and cheerleading. All work on the football field was completed in-house, Coughenour said.

"We have a very active youth football program of several hundred players," she said. "It's the feeder program for our high schools."

Previously, the association rented Poinciana High School's football field for \$1,000 per game, Coughenour said, adding that building its own field was more fiscally responsible.

Preseason practice on the new field will begin at the end of the month.

Ribbon-cutting ceremonies for both the Boys and Girls Clubs teen center and the football field at Vance Harmon Park, at 50 Country Club Drive, will be Tuesday; the football field event will be at 10:30 a.m. and the teen center event follows at 11:15 a.m.

The grand opening and open house for the teen center will be Sept. 14 from 4-6 p.m.

For more information, contact the Association of Poinciana Villages at 863-427-0900.