



Current Edition: Friday, July 1, 2011

YMCA Name and Mission Grow Larger

By NINA TARNAWSKY

For its first birthday, the Island's newest community center got a new name: The Swartz Family YMCA is what the sign reads above the door to the 35,000-square foot building housing a pool, fitness center, cafe and gathering place for thousands of Islanders.

Donors Jim and Susan Swartz, who have given \$3 million to the cause, were honored at a one-year anniversary ceremony at the YMCA of Martha's Vineyard on Thursday, when the sign was unveiled.



Susan and Jim Swartz at the dedication of the YMCA.

Mr. Swartz said he was "totally humbled." He grew emotional when speaking of how proud he was to be a part of the YMCA, which began approaching potential donors, including the Swartzes, in 2004. "Of course, I was an easy convert because I grew up with the Y playing a large part in my life in a small town near Pittsburgh," Mr. Swartz said.

He praised a litany of Islanders who had put time, energy and money into the YMCA, citing the proverb popularized by then-First Lady Hillary Clinton, it takes a village to raise a child: "This Y, with its enormous community impact, is a vivid reminder of the truth of the village concept," he said.

Anniversaries often prompt contemplation of the future; in the coming year the YMCA hopes to extend its reach in the community, build a field house, and open its teen center in time for the school year.



So Many windows give YMCA outdoor feel, even inside.

“We’ve penetrated probably about a quarter of the Island population in our first year of operation,” said Jill Robie, executive director of the YMCA of Martha’s Vineyard since late 2009.

At the end of May the YMCA had 4,500 members. The number jumped to 5,200 this month according to Nina Lombardi, the membership director. Some of these 700 new memberships came from the renewal of seasonal memberships that had lapsed. “We welcome the seasonal members and thank them for their support, but we are really sustained by our year-round Island population,” said Ms. Lombardi.

Confident that the Y has made an impact on the Island, Ms. Robie said, “We still have more outreach to do, we still have more people’s lives to touch, but we’ve made a really good step in the right direction.”

The YMCA faces a \$1.6 million debt that can’t be paid off simply through membership dues, which go to operating costs, said Ms. Robie.

Despite the Y’s debt, Ms. Robie is firm in her commitment to continue giving out scholarships. She hopes to establish an endowment, because she is keenly aware that many of those who would benefit the most from using a facility like the YMCA and all that it offers, can’t afford it.

“We really want to make sure that this Y is always going to be able to serve the people that need it most,” Ms. Robie said. “One thing about the Y is it serves all socio-economic areas.”

Of course summer on the Vineyard is peak fund-raising season, and the YMCA has plans for events in the summer months.

There will be a benefit concert called the Stars and Stripes Fest on Saturday

night, July 2, at Nectar's, featuring headliner Chiddy Bang, the hip-hop duo that holds the record for the longest freestyle rap at over nine hours, 18 minutes and 22 seconds, plus New York bands the Knocks and Savoir Adore. The concert also will showcase some Island talent from the YMCA's own teen center.



YMCA NOT CAUGHT IN SLOW LANE: IN JUST ONE YEAR HAS BECOME ISLAND FIXTURE.

Officials broke ground on the Alexandra Gagnon Teen Center in December, but for now teens meet in the basement of the main building.

Teen center director Tony Lombardi called the space taking shape "the biggest, nicest teen center you'll see anywhere in the country."

Having the YMCA right across the street from the regional high school has been very helpful and has brought in more teenagers, Ms. Robie points out.

Mr. Lombardi said, "In reality what's happening here is that every event or activity that we stage or provide teaches something to the kids, whether it's about social responsibility, digital literacy.

"It's all about trying to create a positive social atmosphere in which kids can learn how to interact with each other and the community around them," he said of the teen center's mission.

The center offers programs in songwriting and recording, a digital literacy program in partnership with Comcast, deejay lessons and classes in lighting and producing.

It's become an important place for kids who have a talent and a passion for music, Ms. Robie said: "It's really a way to nurture some of these kids."

Mr. Lombardi picked up the theme: "We're really trying to address specific needs of the Island kids, which are unique to an isolated community," he said.

Ms. Robie knows that there are kids who will get into trouble whether there is a teen center or not, but she's proud of the variety and number of teens that the Y has attracted.

"It's starting to have a broader appeal because of the broad use of the facility," she said. Some want to use the gym, some are more interested in just hanging out with friends. "Kids have different interests and they embrace them all," Ms. Robie said.

Many Islanders use the YMCA but not for the gym. "It's not unusual that people will come here just to use the café, swim. Families will meet here. Kids have birthday parties here. People will come here and meet for lunch," Ms. Robie said.

Particularly in the winter months, she said, the YMCA becomes a place where

people can come and see each other.

"The high school kids really enjoyed having here to come in between sports," Ms. Robie said

"When you walk in here, no matter what the weather is outside, it's sort of got the same feel," Ms. Robie said.

During a recent visit, the café was full of families of all ages sitting and talking about the weather, weekend plans and the recent capture of James (Whitey) Bulger.

"It's very intergenerational," Ms. Robie said of the Y, pointing to its appeal with grandparents who could bring their grandchildren to the YMCA for a day at the pool followed by smoothies at the café.

Ms. Robie's aim seems to be to integrate the Y into Islanders' lives as smoothly as possible and to make it not just an option, but the obvious choice.

Reader Feedback

Friday, July 1, 2011 10:58am

Your article headlined "YMCA Name and Mission Grow Larger" struck me as much for what it didn't say as for what it did. First, the Island owes a debt of gratitude to the Swartz's for their generosity. But, starting with the inception of its website, I have consistently pointed out to the board and staff of the "Y" that nowhere on their site has ever appeared either the full name of its parent corporation or its history. Both appear on the national website. For those who may be interested, below is a portion of the "Y"'s history as the national association presents it.

In brief, the YMCA, or "Y", was founded in 1844 in London which "was a place of great turmoil and despair. For the young men who migrated to the city from rural areas to find jobs, London offered a bleak landscape of tenement housing and dangerous influences.

[12 Londoners organized] . . . the first Young Men's Christian Association (YMCA), a refuge of Bible study and prayer for young men seeking escape from the hazards of life on the streets.

Although an association of young men meeting around a common purpose was nothing new, the Y offered something unique for its time. The organization's drive to meet social need in the community was compelling, and its openness to members crossed the rigid lines separating English social classes.

Years later, retired Boston sea captain Thomas Valentine Sullivan, working as a marine missionary, noticed a similar need to create a safe 'home away from home' for sailors and merchants. Inspired by the stories of the Y in England, he led the formation of the first U.S. YMCA at the Old South Church in Boston on December 29, 1851."

Today's statement of the corporate mission reads, in part, to "build healthy spirit, mind and body for all." That mission statement appears on every page of the corporate website.

I grew up, honed my rudimentary swimming skills, and both learned and taught sailing, at the 16th Street "Y" and the "Y"'s Camp Letts on the Rhode River near the banks of the Chesapeake Bay. Its membership is not restricted to the young, men, or Christian's. But just as one cannot fully appreciate nations or individuals without knowing their histories, neither can one fully appreciate the YMCA without understanding its history and its role in Western society.

- A Product of the "Y" , Vineyard Haven

© 2011 Vineyard Gazette