

The 'in' place to be: Founder reflects on club's creation

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To celebrate the Edson and District Boys and Girls Club's 25th anniversary, the Edson Leader dug into its archives and tracked down former Edson teacher George Hawryluk to talk about forming the Edson Drop-In Youth Centre, the predecessor to the Boys and Girls Club.

The tale of how the Edson and District Boys and Girls Club came to be is one that illustrates how a good idea, paired with strong public commitment, can make history.

And on the eve of the club's 25th anniversary, which will be celebrated with an open house this Saturday, the man whose idea launched a thousand happy memories is pleased to see the club remains popular as ever.

George Hawryluk was a teacher at Jubilee Junior High School Edson in 1984 and was the man behind the idea to launch a teen hangout that would give Edson and out-of-town youths a cool but safe place to gather.

"I remember it very, very well," Hawryluk said last week.

He was a newcomer to Edson, and noticed there was nothing for local youths to do after the final school bell rang for the day. "There was a little bit of concern about alcohol, drug abuse, inappropriate behaviour."

He saw that some students and youths in the community were struggling against negative influences and were making bad choices. So, he presented these thoughts to his classroom and asked students what they thought might be a solution.

In the Jan. 18, 1984 edition of the Edson Leader newspaper, the students' answers were presented to the public in a series of letters detailing why Edson needed a social club for teenagers.

"There is almost nothing to do if you are not athletic, there is nothing," one student wrote.

Another said "First of all many teenagers, I'm not saying all, but many teenagers in Edson, all they think of is drinking, drugs and sex. They think that they can only have fun with these things. But if we had a social club maybe more teenagers would find out that to have fun you don't need drinking, drugs, etc."

The same class made a presentation to the Edson interagency committee that month, stating their case.

Many children were from out of town "and they just hung out," Hawryluk added.

It's not my credit, the credit belongs to all the volunteers and the countless hours they worked to get it going.'

Former Jubilee Junior High teacher
George Hawryluk

"At least that way, they had a place to go, play pool, and eventually became involved in several different youth programs. Instead of hanging around the pool hall, they had their own place to go to, which was very well controlled, zero tolerance for alcohol and drugs."

By the end of October that year, students, parents and community members had helped a core group of volunteers find a building (the former Edson fire hall in the civic building), secure funding (a \$16,000 grant from the Edson Legion) and spruce up their new spot.

"The kids, parents and I painted it, and made it into a drop-in centre," Hawryluk said.

"The community was very much supportive of it, every single one."

Donations of items like couches, chairs and video games (he thinks

maybe Atari) flooded in.

"And that started it all."

Volunteers formed a board, with Hawryluk as president. A director was hired to run activities and manage the club.

That director, Tim Yule, told the Leader at the time "Teens need a place they can call their own. Potentially there's a need out there. We've got to convince kids and parents that this is an 'in' place to be."

Eventually the popular club outgrew its first home and was moved to Central Elementary School.

Family obligations and time constraints led to Hawryluk leaving the club, but he published a letter thanking the community for its support for the now humming program.

A new director would eventually decide to bring the club under the national Boys and Girls Club umbrella, allowing it access to greater resources, contacts and grants.

"Kids themselves were very happy about it. Parents were just as supportive. Obviously they still are. Twenty five years later, it's just unbelievable."

Hawryluk has since moved to Athabasca after teaching in Edson for eight years. He continues teaching, high school now, and sits on the town's council.

He said that although his idea served as the initial spark, it was really the community and its organizations that got the project off the ground.

"It's not my credit, the credit belongs to all the volunteers and the countless hours they worked to get it going. My hat goes off to all those people and mainly the kids who appreciated what they had."

He remembers in particular one set of students that helped organize the launch of the drop-in centre.

"The kids that were in my behaviour class actually helped me organize it. There were a bunch of kids that I will never forget, they were the best kids I ever had. I still remember their names."