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Kidstop numbers build to peak

By Kevin Allenspach

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Early on a weekday morning, 10-year-old Porter Stiltman can't wait to get to Kidstop.

Shortly after 7 a.m., he makes his way a couple of blocks from his home in Sauk Rapids to Mississippi Heights Elementary School. It's hard to tell what he likes more – the morning cereal snack or the ensuing games of dodgeball, baseball, floor hockey and anything else you can think to do in the gymnasium.

"I come here and hang out with my friends," said Stiltman, taking a break from a 3-on-3 basketball game. "We go through different rotations, so you don't do the same thing all the time."

As you might guess, he likes sports. But he also is a budding amateur photographer – submitting more than 50 photos in a recent contest sponsored by the Boys & Girls Clubs of Central Minnesota. Kidstop, a school-age child care program for children in grades K–6, is an offshoot of the clubs.

"If it wasn't for this, I'd probably be at my grandma's, sitting around watching TV," Stiltman said. "This is my third year coming here. I see a lot of kids I know, and it seems like this year there are probably 15 or 20 more here every day."

That stands to reason if participation figures from the Boys & Girls Clubs continue their recent trend. Average daily attendance at Kidstop and the clubs has increased for the past three years and in 2010 reached its highest level since before the recession. And, if similar growth sustains itself this summer, more children will use the programs than ever before.

Through the first three days of summer vacation, average daily attendance at the area's 14 Kidstop and three club locations was 944. Through the first three days in the summer of 2010, the figure was 823. In the previous seven years for which similar data are available, average daily attendance never topped 876.

"It's good news, in the sense, I think, that (it) means more and more parents are working," said Mark Sakry, local executive director of the Boys & Girls Clubs. "The past few years, the unemployment rate undoubtedly affected the number of kids not needing Kidstop because they were at home with a parent who may have gotten laid off or was unable to find a job. But there's a different trend line for the kids who use the clubs. One of the big draws there is the meal program. And we're finding that's been a draw for families struggling with their income. It's a big deal for the kids to have a place where they can get a good evening meal, for example. You see a difference in behavior and, during the school year, they're getting their homework done. It's hard to focus if your tummy is rumbling."

Whatever the combination, doors are almost constantly swinging open at the Kidstop and Boys & Girls Clubs.

Kidstop rolling

Kidstop is a trademarked name and program that originated in St. Cloud in 1985. It has since been replicated

at more than 1,000 locations nationwide.

Locally in 2010, Kidstop registrations topped 4,300 for the first time.

"Typically, Kidstop is for working parents," said Geri Bechtold, director of Kidstop operations. "But sometimes kids need it just because there's a stressful environment at home. In recent years, I think they've been pulled both ways because the economy has been difficult for parents to deal with and high gas prices may have had an impact on whether those parents could afford to drop their kids off at Kidstop."

During the summer, Kidstop costs \$20.50 per day. Snacks are included and parents are charged only for the days their kids attend.

Scholarships are available, and the amount funded by the United Way/Boys & Girls Club jumped 25 percent from 2009 to 2010. That represents an increasing need, Sakry said, as the scholarship value distributed went from \$150,000 to more than \$200,000.

"We never want to turn a kid away," Sakry said. "Whether it's through a United Way–funded scholarship or the County Child Care program, we're going to try and find a way to make it happen. When those resources aren't enough, we'll seek input from donors and sponsors."

Saving money is only one of the draws for Kidstop. In fact, expense wasn't a consideration for Molly Vogt, who has a 9-year-old daughter and a 7-year-old son at the Oak Ridge Kidstop.

"My kids wanted to go there," Vogt said. "They're well-supervised and it's convenient because they're right there at the school they're familiar with. The people are incredible. They know all the kids and the adults by name. We've lived in three different school districts, and this one is head and shoulders above the rest when it comes to programming like this."

Vogt said she lived in Elk River, where she had to notify providers two days in advance of whenever her kids would attend Kidstop. Previously, her children attended a private school that had no relationship with Kidstop.

"If it wasn't a good program, we wouldn't be here," she said. "They get it. It's not about what we have to do as parents. It's about 'How can I help you?'"

Impact expands

Kendyll Spells, 15, believes she has benefitted greatly from the Eastside Boys & Girls Club. A sophomore at Apollo High School, she's been frequenting the club for 10 years. She believes her life would be drastically different without it.

"I have two older siblings – a brother and a sister – and they were here all the time growing up," Spells said. "I kept pestering everyone until finally I was in kindergarten and got to go along."

"I love this place," she added, glancing around from where she sat in a large, padded chair at a game room that featured a couple of pool tables and a popular video game setup on a big TV in the corner. "I don't have any younger siblings, but the cadets and juniors – the younger kids – they feel like little brothers and sisters to me."

Spells, who plans to go to college and perhaps on to a career in medicine, recently was the Boys & Girls Clubs of Central Minnesota Youth of the Year.

"Coming here keeps my head on straight," said Spells, who says the club is one reason she's different from some girls she knows who have become teenage mothers. "My friends that aren't here, they're off doing things they shouldn't be doing. I'm sure if I wasn't coming here, I'd be off somewhere with them doing things I shouldn't be doing. As you get older, some of the kids my age don't come here as much. But there are a lot more younger kids than I can remember. That's good. I'm sure their parents love it."

Membership in the three clubs in St. Cloud totaled almost 2,200 last year. Ages range from 5–18. In 2006, there were fewer than 1,700 members – each of whom gets a membership card for access to the club in exchange for a \$10 annual fee. And some get help with that.

Lunch and dinner are major reasons kids come to the club. The three local clubs are participating in the national Summer Food Service Program, facilitated by the U.S. Department of Agriculture, for the third consecutive year. The Eastside club provided more than 13,000 meals last year – an increase of 24 percent from 2009. The Roosevelt club was just behind that: almost 12,000 meals, an increase of 22 percent. The Southside club served more than 22,000 meals.

Sakry said kids especially have embraced the new Eastside facility, opened a little more than two years ago, which includes a theater and emphasis on the arts. The new building is more than double the size of the old one.

Older club members also can get help with resumes and learning skills they need to apply for a job.

Finding funding

The Boys & Girls Clubs of Central Minnesota have felt the impact of the recession just like most everyone else. They've experienced a reduction in force of 19 employees from 2007–2010. An increase in volunteers has kept the ratio of staff to children constant, but staff training is down and some employees have gone from full-time with benefits to part-time without benefits.

Deb Nebosis, director of development, is one of several people who has had to ratchet up the efforts to write grant proposals and find nongovernment sources of revenue. She recently received disappointing news that her clubs weren't among those chosen to receive assistance from General Mills. Then she learned that for 50 awards given, there were 1,000 applicants from youth-serving agencies.

"There's just so much competition," Nebosis said. "We have to work harder and do more fundraising than ever just to keep up."

Why? Federal, state and local government support has decreased 31 percent from 2007–2011.

"Our national organization has said: Don't count on government funding as much in the foreseeable future," Sakry said.

Fortunately, private and public foundation grants have increased 22 percent from 2007–2011. During the same time frame, individual giving and service club contributions have increased – 28 percent and 20 percent, respectively.

Some of those grants, however, are tied to whether the club can show a correlation between their offerings and, for example, crime prevention.

"That's hard to measure," Nebosis said. "But we're doing it. We're keeping track of things we never did before because everyone wants to see results."

Those results remain to be seen but – whether it's because of more parents returning to work or families fighting through a tough economy or the success of popular programs – Kidstop and the area Boys & Girls Clubs are affecting more children than ever.

Boys & Girls Club, kidstop sites

Here are the locations and phone numbers for the three St. Cloud locations of the Boys & Girls Clubs:

- » Eastside, 320 Raymond Ave. NE, 253-5159.
- » Roosevelt, 345-30th Ave. N, 257-5124.
- » Southside, 1205 Sixth Ave. S, 251-4314.

Here are the locations and phone numbers for the 14 Kidstop sites at schools in Central Minnesota:

- » Clearview, 7310 Minnesota Highway 24, Clear Lake; 743-2243.
- » Discovery, 700 Seventh St. S, Waite Park; 258-3706.
- » Kennedy, 1300 Jade Road, St. Joseph; 363-4737.
- » Lincoln, 336 Fifth Ave. SE, St. Cloud; 255-1194.
- » Madison, 2805 Ninth St. N, St. Cloud; 252-2127.
- » Mississippi Heights, 1003 Fourth St. S, Sauk Rapids; 257-0570.
- » Oak Hill, 2600 Stearns County Road 136, St. Cloud; 259-5081.
- » Oak Ridge, 1111-27th St. N, Sartell; 656-3701.
- » Pine Meadow, 1029 Fifth St. N, Sartell; 656-3701.
- » Pleasantview, 1009 Sixth Ave. N, Sauk Rapids; 259-0421.
- » Rocori, 601 Red River Ave. N, Cold Spring; 685-4959.
- » St. Boniface, 501 Main St, Cold Spring; 828-3026.
- » Talahi, 1321 University Drive SE, St. Cloud; 654-6363.
- » Westwood, 5800 Ridgewood Road, St. Cloud; 251-1150.