

Christian Skate Park Reaches Thousands of Unserved Teens

Rocketown has become one of the most popular hangout spots in Nashville, Tenn.

A Christian-run skate park co-founded by musician Michael W. Smith is attracting thousands of teens in Nashville, Tenn., and is set to be duplicated in other cities across the nation.

Rocketown, a 40,000-square-foot, state-of-the-art youth complex, provides a safe haven for youth that rivals many secular clubs, concert venues and skate parks in the area. The facility is composed of a 13,000-foot indoor skateboard park, a dance and concert venue, a coffee shop and a clothing store designed to get kids inside this former warehouse that cost roughly \$3 million to renovate.

“The mission is ... attract kids, and so we need to be ... an attraction,” executive director Roger Thompson said. “The more often they come, the more often they’re going to interact with us and the volunteers, and we’ll be able to build a relationship with them.”

Since it opened in January, Rocketown has seen more than 50,000 teens walk through its doors. Because of repeated requests, Thompson and the Rocketown board, which includes Smith, are developing a program to help other communities launch similar ministries. Meanwhile, the center continues to seek funds and volunteers for its own efforts.

The idea for Rocketown, at least in germ form, dates back to 1992 when Smith saw “the loneliness, confusion, and hurt in

the eyes of teenagers in my hometown.” He said he “dreamed of building something new: a safe and exciting place for teenagers to interact that was relevant to their culture.”

Rocketown leaders say about 90 percent of the regular attendees are unchurched. Keith Steunebrink, who manages Rocketown’s Empyrean coffee shop, said the arts have helped build a bridge. In addition to booking art exhibits and live bands, he helps run a summer training camp for improvisational acting.

“Art and music ... are a great place to start talking about God,” he said. “It’s a very easy transition to lead into discussion about some [deeper] things.”

Sixth Avenue skate park manager Alex McGlothlin leads a Bible study for young skaters on Sunday nights at the park. “It gives us a good chance to ... actually get involved in the kids’ lives,” he said. He also has helped some of his students financially, contributing such items as skating equipment and shoes.

“Alex is pretty cool,” admitted young Mikey, who at 4 feet tall has the low center of gravity he needs to brave the ramps and rails at Sixth Avenue. Mikey attends the skaters’ Bible study where, “You learn about the Bible, and about some kings, and how you can do skateboarding and be with God.”

For many teens at Rocketown the Sixth Avenue Bible study is the only time they hear the gospel. But leaders say youth often are most affected when they see the gospel.

Thompson and a staff member gave up a recent Friday night’s

sleep to talk with four teenage girls left behind after an event. "We were there until 2 [a.m.] with these girls whose parents didn't even want to come pick them up," he recalled. Thompson said one of the girls said she wanted to come back because someone showed compassion for her.

"This is where we get to be Christ with these kids," he said, "by sitting in a downtown parking lot with them until 2 in the morning. That's one out of 400 that we might have gotten through to [that night], but to us, it's worth it."

Rachel Williams in Nashville, Tenn.