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Gathering around a computer at Skrappy's to use wireless Internet are, from left, Adrien Bojorquez, 17; Thias Lopez, 17; Ismael Ortiz, 17; Jesus Robles, 17; and Cyprian Ortiz, 16. **photo by dean knuth / arizona daily star**

Skrappy's seeks a home

Teen haven is much involved in the community, but must find new address by March 31

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Every afternoon dozens of teenagers head Downtown to Skrappy's, a boxy, teal building with no visible street-side signs. Band T-shirts hang from the ceiling and a colorful spray-painted mural backs the stage where local and touring groups play.

The well-worn building and the ragtag teens inside create a welcoming atmosphere with just enough attitude to be cool.

The teen haven on the corner of Fifth Avenue and East Broadway may not seem like much at first glance, but Skrappy's is more than punk music and graffitied walls.

"We're not just a music venue," youth coordinator Kathy Wooldridge said.

"That's how you get kids in, but there's a whole different side to us. We're so involved in the community."

On a typical evening the place fills with rockers in tight jeans, break dancers in beanies and kids with creative combinations of piercings, tattoos and

anything-goes hair, from neon pink streaks to mohawks. The mostly 13- to 25-year-olds come to lounge on couches, talk to friends, surf the Internet, listen to music or defy gravity in a break-dancing or capoeira class.

Many also come for clothing and blankets, emergency shelter, help finding a job, drug counseling or to fulfill community service requirements.

"Each kid has their own reason for being there," said Wooldridge, who founded Skrappy's in 1996.

But soon the rockers, dancers and drifters who found a vibrant community inside that scruffy building will have to go somewhere else — exactly where is yet to be determined.

After seven years, Skrappy's month-to-month lease will end March 31, and the popular center has yet to find a new place.

It's not for lack of trying. As soon as Skrappy's joined Our Family Services in 2001, Sue Krahe-Eggleston, executive director, began looking for a new location for the rapidly expanding youth center, but none of the more than 20 buildings she looked at panned out. Wooldridge worries that people have the wrong perception of Skrappy's.

"They know about the shows but not about the other programs," she said.

Skrappy's has continued to add new programs over the years, and more — a library, literacy and GED classes, support groups and a variety of art classes — are on the way.

"Things are going so well — this is our year," Wooldridge said. "It always boils down to the building issue."

A mentor to many

Wooldridge is constantly planning, networking and facilitating new opportunities for Skrappy's, but she's never too busy for one of "her kids."

With her easy smile and hearty laugh, Wooldridge is a mentor to many of the 14,000 youths who take part in Skrappy's programs or services each year.

While Wooldridge pursues every Downtown building possibility, she's quick to point out the importance of the relationships inside. Skrappy's is, according to its MySpace page, "a place young people give each other the support, acceptance, love and family structure that may be missing in their lives."

The tight-knit community made all the difference to Jesse Vasquez, who began going to Skrappy's at age 13. When he was on welfare and his dad was in prison, Vasquez found the support he needed at Skrappy's.

"I moved out when I was 16 and I was really poor," said Vasquez, who turns 20 Tuesday. "Kathy would always buy us groceries or get us grocery store cards."

Now a cook and an artist, Vasquez helps teach an art class at Skrappy's. It's one of several programs of its kind — audio recording, videography and photography — that the youth center offers or will soon offer.

"It's teaching them basics of the business," Wooldridge said. "That's our goal — to teach these kids who aren't going to school how to make a living doing their passion."

Vasquez's story is echoed time and again by young adults who help out at Skrappy's. Nate Camacho, 21, has been coming to Skrappy's for six years and is now the break-dancing teacher.

"Even before there was a class here, we'd dance here during open rec," he said. "It's been an open platform for us to do what we do. A lot of us come from communities that have gangs and drugs, but we choose to dance with our time."

"Skrappy's has done a lot for me," he said. "I wouldn't be where I am if I didn't have Skrappy's."

Reaching out to others

While Skrappy's helps out kids who come there, it also reaches out to others. Thanks to a grant from the National Children, Youth and Families at Risk Program, 27 Skrappy's kids are working to address youth homelessness through GPS mapping, video production, media literacy, research and activism. Next year Wooldridge will present their findings and suggestions to the state Legislature.

The same grant will send Wooldridge and four Skrappy's kids to the Children, Youth and Families at Risk Conference in May in Chicago where they will show a film about Skrappy's and speak about positive youth development. Skrappy's addresses sexual assault through peer education and Teen Theatre. This year it plans to do four short films with a youth educator and seven different kids in each film.

A private donation allowed Skrappy's to buy the video cameras, computers and books the kids need to succeed in the projects, Wooldridge said. She hopes to hold a Skrappy's film festival at the end of the year to showcase all of the short films.

Skrappy's kids also teach an art class every Tuesday and Thursday at Old Pueblo Children's Academy, a public charter school affiliated with a group care agency for abused and neglected children. Principal Ronda McCarthy appreciates that Skrappy's provides free art classes, but there's more — her students can relate to the Skrappy's kids.

"They have conversations with them and talk about their lives," she said. "The kids love Skrappy's. They look forward to it. They've done a lot for our school. We're really grateful."

Although they are volunteers, Skrappy's kids get something in return for their time, said Lindsey Duel, 19.

"Deep down I know they love it when we come here," she said as she recently helped 28 seventh- and eighth-graders make colorful pillows. "It's nice to know we're helping kids who don't have a lot to go home to." When she was 15 and not fitting in at school, Duel started going to Skrappy's and she found great friends there. The skills she learned working at the cafe helped her land paying jobs, but she still volunteers in other programs. Skrappy's kids offer something to children that no adult can, said Duel, who sports pencil-size holes and silver spacers in her ears.

"I just think they like that we're not clean-cut," she said. "We're from Skrappy's. We're older but we're not old so they can look up to us."

Site to be construction zone

Skrappy's building owner insists that the organization has not overstayed its welcome.

"It's a great program and I totally support it," said Doug Biggers, who owns the Rialto block.

Biggers has extended the Skrappy's lease before, but with the Rialto renovations gearing up, he said he will soon have to close the entire block.

"That will probably start in the summer in earnest and that whole site will be a construction zone," he said.

Although Biggers found Skrappy's to be a good tenant, he's not surprised it's having trouble finding a new location.

"They're certainly a good neighbor, but you bring 300 to 400 kids down for a show and that creates certain situations you have to take into account," he said. "I don't think they are a bad neighbor, but are they appropriate next to anything? No, probably not."

There has been only one violent incident in the center's 11 years. That came in 2005 when a group of adults from a Phoenix gang invaded the venue during a heavy metal show and one gang member ended up dead. Combine that with the number of youths who turn out for concerts and people form an incorrect opinion of the usually peaceful youth center, Wooldridge said.

"They have the wrong perception of us because we're not very vocal about the other stuff," she said.

Richard Elías, chairman of the Pima County Board of Supervisors, has been helping Skrappy's find a new home. He acknowledges that evening activities

with music and teenagers may make people hesitant, but he hopes they will see past the stereotypes.

"I think they are a good group of kids," he said. "Sometimes we tend to make judgments about people based on how they look, but that's really unfair. When I've spoken to the kids at Skrappy's, they've been respectful, thoughtful and very intelligent. It seems to me that it's a group of young people trying to do something good, trying to stay out of trouble and trying to create a safe place to listen to music, have some fun and share their troubles with each other. I think that's something all of us as youngsters sought."

He hopes more building owners and managers will step forward. After all, it's in the Downtown community's interest, he said. Statistics show that kids get in trouble between 3 and 7 p.m. — the same time Skrappy's is open.

"I think Skrappy's is a program that has tremendous value to the community," said City Councilwoman Nina Trasoff, who is also helping Skrappy's find a new home. "It's an important alternative to have for young people who want a safe place to go to hang out after school and in the evenings."

Skrappy's cafe volunteer Ricky Urias, 16, agrees.

"Overall, it's just a place for kids to stay out of trouble," he said. "I think a lot of people just think it's a bunch of troublemakers, but they're wrong. "This place really turned my life around. Before I came here I didn't really care what I did, but now I actually care about something. I enjoy helping people out. Even when I'm not working, I'm here."

Need for 5,000 square feet

Skrappy's criteria for a new home includes at least 5,000 square feet, heat and swamp cooling and relatively inexpensive rent.

"We don't have a lot of money so we need someone who wants to give back to the community," Krahe-Eggleston said.

Most importantly, the new location must be Downtown. Kids citywide visit Skrappy's — a large map in the youth center dotted with yellow pins shows just how far many travel — and they can take any city bus to get there without transfers.

"We get a lot of kids from all over who come Downtown after school," Wooldridge said. "The homeless kids aren't going to leave the Downtown area. That's why it's important for us as a resource center to be Downtown." Skrappy's kids are the future Downtown residents and business leaders, Krahe-Eggleston said. A survey of Skrappy's kids found that the majority

spend most of their time and money Downtown, and many older kids, such as Duel, move Downtown "because I'm there all the time already," she said. But as the long, unsuccessful search for a building continues, many Skrappy's kids feel that the Downtown community is not welcoming them, said Wooldridge. She thinks the Downtown redevelopment plans lack a youth element.

"There's a whole community they are ignoring," she said. "Where you hung out as a kid is where you hang out as an adult."

Trasoff, who is the Rio Nuevo/Downtown, Arts, Culture and History Subcommittee chair, said the general idea of Rio Nuevo is to make Downtown inviting to people of all ages and interests.

"There is an attitude and a commitment to making Downtown the heart for everyone, and everyone includes them," she said.

Two leads for new locations

In the past couple weeks, Skrappy's has looked into two leads for new locations. While it's too soon to know if either will become its new home — there are many hurdles to clear before that can happen — Wooldridge is hopeful.

"That brings morale way up," she said. "Even if we can't make the building work, it was a tiny ray of hope. Deep down, I really believe something will come through."