

# The Pilot

Get the Catholic Perspective

Jacqueline Cunniff | August 20, 2021

## A Look at the Teen Center at St. Peter's



Participants In Catholic Charities' Teen Center At St. Peter's Summer Program Are Pictured During An Outing To Boston's Seaport District. Pilot Photo/Courtesy Catholic Charities

Catholic Charities of Boston's Teen Center at St. Peter's serves as a safe haven for teens living in one of Dorchester's most troubled areas: the Bowdoin-Geneva neighborhood. The center provides after-school enrichment, tutoring and recreational activities, as well as summer programming, to over 300 teens each year.

The Teen Center focuses on adolescents who have been disproportionately exposed to and involved in teen violence in Dorchester. Through critical outreach efforts and extensive, well-structured programming, the Teen Center has been successful in helping to interrupt the rapidly expanding cycle of violence. Each young person who comes through the door receives personal attention, and the tutoring and mentoring they need to succeed, as well as family outreach for additional support.

Recently, Program Director Joao Dos Santos shared how the Teen Center adapted to help its members through an unprecedented year living through a pandemic, the center's summer programming, and how they're gearing up for a busy school year.

Joao shares, "Our goal for the Teen Center is to make it a welcoming, supportive, fun, and safe space for teens in our community. When parents send their kids to the center, they know that their kids are safe, getting fed, and having fun. It takes a lot of stress off of families."

Managing a busy Teen Center is challenging enough, but when COVID-19 hit last year, it created added challenges for the 10 full-time Teen Center staff members.

Joao shares, "From March through July of 2020, our focus was on supporting our families from afar. We provided each of our members' families with groceries, personal items and basic household goods, and delivered everything to their homes. Over 300 families received assistance. Although we could not gather with our members, we wanted to make sure that their families were safe and had what they needed."

The Teen Center opened on a smaller scale than usual this summer, welcoming close to 100 members for summer programming. Operating Monday through Saturday, the summer program provides adolescents with the

opportunity to receive academic support and tutoring, participate in art classes, sports and wellness, play games, dance, and work with a career center specialist for computer workshops.

Thanks to the support of local partner organizations, including Save the Harbor Save the Bay, the Knights of Columbus, and The New England Food Foundation (NEFF), members participate in weekly field trips to amusement parks, the Boston Harbor Islands, CCAB's Sunset Point Camp, the NEFF Cape Cod House, and more.

Joao shares, "We are so grateful for the partnerships and donor support that help us give our teens opportunities that they would otherwise not have access to. Getting them outside having fun this summer, especially after such a tough year, is amazing."

The Teen Center is gearing up for the beginning of the school year and expecting membership to double from the summer program's numbers. During the school year, the Teen Center's after-school programming is more academic-focused. The program runs from 2:30 to 9 p.m., Monday through Friday; and for the first two to three hours, teens work with tutors and mentors on academics, then get to participate in sports and recreational activities at the end of the day. The Teen Center's staff, programs, and activities aim to increase teens' self-esteem while providing the tools needed for academic and personal growth.

Joao was a member at the Teen Center when his family moved into the neighborhood from Cape Verde years ago.

"It was a place that gave me hope and showed me that there are great things in life

that you can accomplish just by being a part of the program and being around great leaders and great role models," he explains.

Now, Joao shares that running the program that he was once a part of is an exciting and challenging full-circle experience.

"Everything that I went through as a teen, I can now pass on to our members. I know what the kids are dealing with outside of the Teen Center, and I like the challenge that comes with each day. You have to be prepared to deal with any circumstance, and I'm proud that our program is here to support kids, no matter what is happening in their lives outside of these walls," he says.

Joao shares that the most rewarding part of working at the Teen Center is seeing the kids happy and keeping them safe.

He elaborates, "Knowing that when the kids come here, they are engaged in healthy activities, learning from mentors, getting what could be their one meal of the day -- that is why we do what we do, to keep the kids healthy, happy, and safe."

He continues, "The Catholic Charities Teen Center is a magical place because it has changed the lives of so many."

To learn more about the Catholic Charities Teen Center at St. Peter's, please visit [www.ccab.org/TeenCenter](http://www.ccab.org/TeenCenter).