

# West Hartford Teen Center Receives ‘Merry Makeover’

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December 13, 2023

‘The Base,’ West Hartford’s Teen Center which is sponsored by the Bridge Family Center and located in the basement of the Elmwood Community Center, received a ‘Merry Makeover’ courtesy of Camden Grace Interiors and their partners.



The ribbon was cut after the ‘Merry Makeover’ by Camden Grace at ‘The Base,’ West Hartford’s teen center at the Elmwood Community Center, was revealed on Dec. 13, 2023. Photo credit: Ronni Newton

*By Ronni Newton*

It was the type of “Christmas morning” moment that all wished for on Wednesday morning – the reveal of a “Merry Makeover” redesigned space for The Base, West Hartford’s teen center – courtesy of Camden Grace Interiors and other local businesses that partnered with them for the effort.

Sadie Levy and Natalee Dicorpo already love spending time at the teen center, which has operated out of a small room in the basement of the Elmwood Community Center that some refer to as a “closet,” but having a bright new space in the room next door that formerly contained just a lonely old pool table and some folding chairs makes them even more excited about the future of The Base.

Levy, a senior at Hall, has been the president of The Base’s teen leadership committee for the past three years. “I come every week and it’s been a really good thing for my high school experience, having this place to come.” She also enjoys spending time with the staff.

“The teen center has been a very important space for me. ... I think having this new space is really, really important. It shows that the town cares about the teens,” she said.

“I just started learning how to game. I’m not a gamer but there’s a game I wanted to play,” she said, and she can do that at the teen center without having to get a system for her home. “Just watching the kids come in and try things, it’s super exciting,” she added. Basketball [played in the gym at Elmwood Community Center] has always been a big thing, and kids also play pool.

Levy said she’s excited about the new activities like ping pong, and hopes having more to do, and the new space, will attract more Hall students.



Teen Center leaders Sadie Levy (left) and Natalee Dicorpo share their excitement for the redesigned teen center. Photo credit: Ronni Newton

Dicorpo, a junior and also a member of the teen leadership committee, said she has been coming since her freshman year at Hall. “I’ve definitely made a lot of new friends here,” she said, and even got an award for attracting new members. She said she enjoys playing video games, watching and sometimes playing basketball, and enjoys teen nights where there are more people.

“With our old room it was definitely quite small,” Dicorpo said, and few used the billiards table. “Now I’m a thousand percent sure everyone is going to be in here ... this is going to be the new space.”

Both knew something was in the works, but didn’t see the space until Wednesday mornings reveal. “It was a total surprise, super cool,” both said.





Teen Center leaders Sadie Levy (right) and Natalee Dicorpo enjoying the redesigned teen center. Photo credit: Ronni Newton

Virtually everything was updated as part of the redesign, including new paint, flooring, and carpeting, modern track lighting to replace the fluorescent features, addition of a mural, a combination ping pong/billiards table, gaming devices, foosball, and brightly-colored and invitingly-comfortable furnishings.

“This is an important day for us,” Mayor Shari Cantor said at the ribbon cutting ceremony. The teen center is so important for the community, she said.

“We’re thrilled. I want to thank The Bridge for their tremendous impact that they have on our families in town and how they change lives every day,” Cantor said. “It’s really important that this space be updated and reflect the amount of care and the importance they have in our lives.”



Mayor Shari Cantor (left) and Camden Grace owner Jeanne Barber at the 'Merry Makeover' reveal on Dec. 13, 2023. Photo credit: Ronni Newton

She praised Jeanne Barber, owner of West Hartford-based Camden Grace, and her team, for their smart design of what is still a very small space.

Barber thanked The Bridge for making the job so easy for them, and the teens for sharing their ideas about what they would like to see in the space.

This is the fourth year in a row that Camden Grace has undertaken a "Merry Makeover." The past three were for individual families facing some type of adversity, she said, including a family battling brain cancer. The second year they took nominations.

"This year we chose The Bridge because we wanted to expand our reach and expand our impact, and truthfully I couldn't be happier. We are very thankful in seeing the smiles today," Barber said.

Barber also expressed her thanks to her partners, the businesses that she asked to help with the project.

"This is a physical space but you really are the hearts and minds," she said.



The project took 2½ weeks to actually execute, said Barber, although it was in the planning stages since late October.



The Bridge Executive Director Margaret Hann speaks at the 'Merry Makeover' reveal on Dec. 13, 2023.  
Photo credit: Ronni Newton

“Wow, this is beautiful,” said Margaret Hann, executive director of The Bridge, thanking the Camden Grace team for their “hard work, perseverance, dedication, and vision for our space.”

Hann said the teen center started in 1998, her first year as executive director, when she approached Jim Capodice, the former Leisure Services director, for a space. He found what had been a maintenance office in the basement of the Elmwood Community Center and helped fix it up, and The Bridge was thrilled. “It’s a story of vision, of partnership, of finding a way. And that is the partnership and the vision that the Town of West Hartford has for young people and that The Bridge is fortunate enough to be a partner in those visions.”

The teen center has operated out of that same space ever since – until now. And the vision will continue with plans for the future.



A 'Merry Makeover' by Camden Grace at 'The Base,' West Hartford's teen center at the Elmwood Community Center, was revealed on Dec. 13, 2023. Photo credit: Ronni Newton

Since its inception, The Bridge has supervised the teen center, known as “The Base” – which is a “safe, supervised, substance-free, drop-in center open to West Hartford high school students which offers basketball, billiards, video games, ping-pong, creative arts, monthly field trips, and space for teens to just hang out together. Chris Dutton, director of Clinical Operations, said during regular “drop-in” times there are anywhere from 15-30 teens hanging out at The Base, and 50-60 come out for teen nights, one of which will take place on Friday. He said that since the beginning of the year, about 190 different teens have visited The Base.





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Woodworker Matt Visintainer of Ikag LLC donated his services to craft the parson's table which is now surrounded by brightly-hued bar stools. It's made of rough sawn white oak with a dark gray oil finish. "I did a coffee table with these people last year and saw that they were getting into it this year and reached out, found out exactly what the project was going to be, and when they found out there was a need for a table I said, 'that's perfect, that's exactly what we do.'"





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Andy Veselak of AVE Remodeling does most of the remodeling projects for Camden Grace Interiors. "She asked me to donate some time and I was more than happy to," he said. "It turned out great, the kids will love it. It's the perfect place."

Coincidentally Veselak's wife, Amanda Miser, already had a connection to The Bridge that neither of them realized when he took on the challenge, but that makes the project even more special. "My grandmother actually started The Bridge. ... She was one of the founders of the organization," Miser said of her grandmother, Ruth Freymann, who began volunteering in 1971 and in 1975 became the organization's second executive director. She was instrumental in the creation of the youth shelter on Farmington Avenue, now called Freymann House.



Andy Veselak of AVE and Amanda Miser, whose grandmother was a founder of The Bridge. Photo credit: Ronni Newton

Hann, the sixth executive director, has been in that position since 1998.

The process of transforming the underutilized space was smooth, Barber said, but it's also shared with the senior center, and she noted that they had to be sure the billiards table in particular still met with the approval of the seniors.

Venora Electric donated four guys to do all of the lighting, Barber said, and AVE Remodeling did the work on the walls and the painting. New England Flooring installed the carpet, she said, and there were other businesses that also donated, such as Dick's Sporting Goods. Brigid O'Loughlin, a member of the Camden Grace team, painted the mural.





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"A lot of people donated which also made us able to take it to the next level," Barber said.

"They gave us carte blanche," Barber said, regarding the design. "They were very trusting."

Seeing the smiles on the faces of Levy and Dicorpo Wednesday morning was so rewarding, she said.

There is hope that eventually the teen center will operate out of the new Elmwood Community Center being planned for the nearby property at 100 Mayflower Street, and Barber said the furniture and other items in the space will be able to be relocated. Dutton said The Bridge is very happy to have had a seat at the table during the planning process for that facility. Responses to an RFP for the design were submitted this fall, and finalists have been identified, according to the town's website.

Members of the Camden Grace team include Barber, O'Loughlin, Julia Zajac, Corey Hunton, Jen Mallin, Angie Pierandri, and Ashley Earle.



Businesses that donated to the effort include AVE Remodeling (contractor services), Venora Electric (electrical), New England Flooring (carpet), Light New England (light fixtures), Junk Bear (debris removal), Ikag LLC (woodworking), Sound Decision LLC (Audio/Visual Set Up), Michele Wolff Photography (photos), and Dacor Installation (receiver, furniture installation).



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The small space that has served as the teen center at the Elmwood Community Center. Photo credit: Ronni Newton

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