





**By Judy Weeks**

**IMMOKALEE** — The new Immokalee Youth Center received high scores from community parents and youngsters at the ribbon cutting ceremonies on Dec. 22.

“I see this Youth Center as an investment in our future,” Immokalee Board Liaison Dorothy Scheffler said. “Growing up as a member of this community and raising my children here, I know the importance of our youth having a place where they can safely spend their time in a healthy structured atmosphere. They can take pride in this center as they play and learn to work together while developing lifestyle values that will help shape the rest of their lives.”

Immokalee children gathered in front of the new center in anticipation of the ribbon cutting ceremony. Speaking on their behalf, Little Miss Seminole Jordan Osceola thanked Tribal leaders and elders for providing the new facility where they can meet, interact and grow in a wholesome environment. Then, Brandon Scheffler and Mauro Perez joined her in cutting the ribbon for the grand opening.

Big Cypress Board Rep. Joe Frank remembered when children had to use more of their imagination for play.

“I grew up here in Immokalee at the old Panther Camp where a two-by-four, piece of rope or tin can inspired us as we played around the fire, when we weren’t helping our parents in the fields,” Rep. Frank said. “I am proud to be a part of providing our current generation with a healthy atmosphere in which to grow and prosper. This Youth Center is a memorial to our parents and grandparents who worked so hard to make it possible for us to be here today.”

The new Youth Center occupies a building that has endured a slow evolution along with the growth of the Immokalee Reservation. Originally constructed as a small house, it became the initial Immokalee Field Office with space for the Broadcasting Department. Additions were added each time that it reached capacity, but it was difficult to keep up in the flourishing community.

The Field Office was relocated when the Administration Building was completed, and the building then became the Housing Department headquarters. Later, the structure underwent an extensive makeover in anticipation of opening its doors to the young people of Immokalee.

Recreation director Richard Blankenship conducted a tour of the facilities. A computer lab with six stations, Xbox and PlayStation 3 consoles, games and instructional materials immediately caught the eye of a group of young admirers. Next door contains a theater room with a visual library.

Tables for pool, foosball, air hockey and numerous other activities complete a game room, and the generously stocked craft center will accommodate all age categories and a wide variety of projects. The state-of-the-art kitchen cannot only provide healthy snacks but also cooking classes.

“Our original small Youth Center across the road was torn down eight years ago,” Council Office project manager Ralph Sanchez said. “The old building was gone but not the need which has been constantly growing. The old Field Office is in close proximity to the gym and has played an integral part in our lives for many years. Incorporating it in the programs that will help build our children’s future was a wise decision.”

Immokalee Recreation site manager Cecilia Pequeno agreed.

“The opening of this Youth Center is a big achievement for the community,” Pequeno said. “The majority of my staff is comprised of Tribal members or parents of community members. We grew up on the streets of this reservation and know how important it is to have a safe place to go, meet with our friends and develop values that will help combat adverse peer pressure. Our culture depends upon our investment in our youth, and we are looking forward to the time that we will spend with them in the new Immokalee Youth Center.”

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