## Caroline Porter

## YMCA does the right thing: opens Youth Center in underserved area of town

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When the current YMCA building was built in the 1970s on Carl Sandburg Drive in Northwest Galesburg, there was criticism that it was not more centrally located. There were good arguments for that, but also good ones for locating in a new building with room to expand, which the "Y" has done this year.

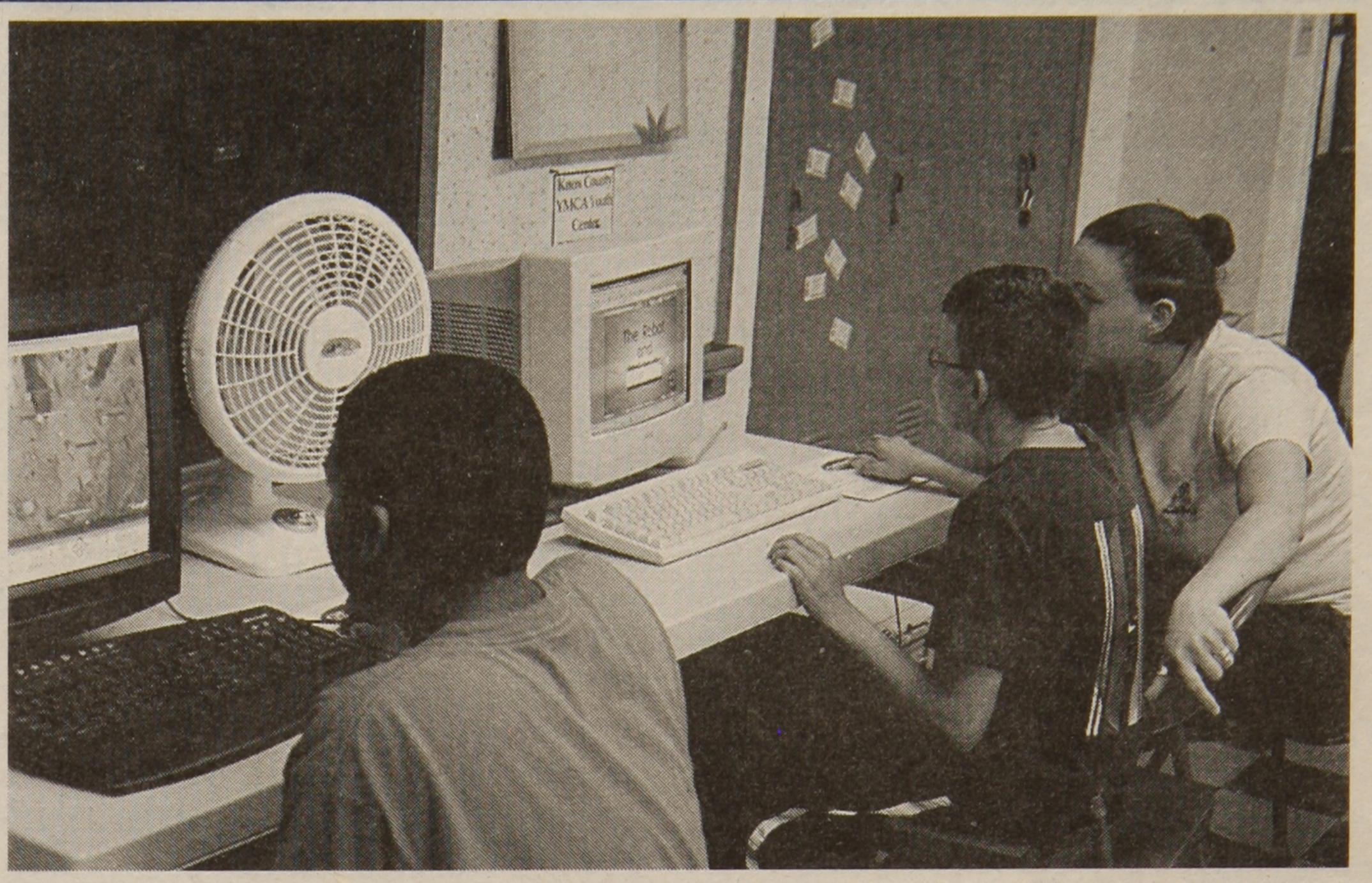
Answering the need for a more central location, constructive after school activity and help for junior high students, the Y has just opened a Youth Center at 850 Mulberry St. This is not a sitter service. Programs offered from 3 to 7 p.m. on school days, run the gamut from a computer lab to a pottery wheel, help with homework, sports, martial arts, open gym time and life skills development. It's a place to be safe, have fun and snacks, and make friends. The Youth Center is a half-mile from Lombard Junior High and two and a half miles from Churchill - easy walking for young people, but transportation from school can be provided.

Jami Eager, program director at the Y, says that when the old Lombard College gym was to be demolished, board and staff members wondered if the building could be a youth center. They had a grant opportunity to fund the project from the Illinois Department of Human Services. Eager and B.J. Wilken, former program director, produced a 19 page, detailed grant application in March and learned in July they have been awarded \$70,000.

YMCA personnel had also decided the Lombard gym was too old for renovation. In a conversation with Regional Superintendent of Schools, Bonnie Harris, Harris suggested to Eager that the Y approach Reverend Lewis Woods of the Illinois Baptist College for a location. He was very receptive and has been wonderful to offer their facilities, said Eager. She said the schools and community agencies have been cooperative. Agencies include the Knox County Health Department, Bridgeway Prevention, and University of Illinois Extension Service. Other community agencies are welcome to become involved, she said.

After only three weeks, sixteen youth are enrolled at the Center. Y staff members, Aaron Duke, Tim Greene and Live Weimers are on hand every day. To participate, a family must go to the YMCA and fill out an application, sign numerous forms and pay a one-time fee of \$25 for the whole school year. If the fee is prohibitive, the Y can help qualified students. Any Junior High student in the county can apply, but transportation from other communities can't be provided.

In addition to her gratitude for the help of Bonnie Harris and Reverend Woods, Eager praised the newly formed Knox County Substance Abuse Prevention Coalition for providing much of the data for the grant application. The group's board of directors includes representatives from agencies in the community, including Ms. Eager, who



Trenton Fields and Christian Lesones work on computers while Youth Mentor Live Wiemers assists.

deal with drug issues.

who have received this grant," said Ms. Eager," and Galesburg was one of only 22 new agencies to be awarded grant funds this year."

What a valuable service this is to the community. The Y should be commended

and supported for their creativity and ability "There are only 122 agencies in Illinois to provide valuable services for Junior High youth and their families.

Caroline Porter is a freelance writer from Galesburg, who can be reached at cporter@ galesburg.net. Other columns are online at www.thezephyr.com.