

Teen haven to close, seeks home

By Susan Besze Wallace

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Dec. 2, 2000 - The strip-mall coffeehouse that opened to mentor teens after the Columbine shooting - and went on to find a niche long after the tragedy - is closing this weekend. Its future is uncertain.

"The Place," an art-strewn haven where peace and playfulness commingled and kids said they felt a rare acceptance, must leave its rent-free home near the old Cooper 7 movie theater. The property has been sold.

The brainchild of Broomfield couple Ray and Aricia LaFrance, The Place opened July 31, 1999, to gather teens still frightened or confused after the shooting, or dealing with other teenage angst. They brought funky furnishings, they learned chess, they did homework, and they napped. They found adults who listened. And they trusted them.

"The community was all, "Let's do everything we can' after Columbine, but a year later it's, "We're done,'

" Aricia LaFrance said. "I was absolutely sure the community would come forward and help. The need was so much more than we expected, and the support was so much less.

"In America we seem to want to solve a crisis when it happens instead of preventing it. We're a society that reacts."

The LaFrances, concerned about the effects of closing, are looking for a low- or no-rent place where the kids can at least continue to gather weekly, if not re-create the teen-bedroom ambiance of The Place.

"Like my second home"

Of the 200 volunteers who called The Place and offered help postColumbine, about 20 stuck around. A core of 10 people has served an estimated 1,500 teens. Money for insurance and utilities has been an issue, and in June, when the shoestring of a budget was about to break, philanthropist Bob Sturm donated \$42,000 and kept The Place open another four months.

"But it can't be a handful of people," Aricia LaFrance said. "People can't think someone else will take care of it." On Saturday, the teens themselves will help empty their space. "I will be crying. It is almost like my second home. .

. It hurts me very much," said Chatfield High senior Lori Koehler.

"The Place has made an impact on so many kids' lives in this community, whether it was Ray welcoming newcomers and asking them if they wanted a cup of coffee, or Daniel staying up late on a Saturday night to clean," she said.

"Every person who walked in felt its unique atmosphere." Volunteers mourn closing. For about two months, Lori and her friends have only been able to gather on Friday nights, as hours have been cut back to gradually wean kids from their hangout. Volunteers are having a hard time extracting themselves.

"We're trying to stay positive, because we believe in our efforts," said AnnaMaria Vuxinic, a Place volunteer and board member. "We recently had a meeting about how to go forward. The kids there, they gave testimonials about how had it not been for our efforts, they'd still be on the streets doing drugs.

"It's amazing how much they'll share if someone treats them with respect," she said. After raising his own four teenagers, Lou Cohn jumped at the chance to help at The Place. He was the Sunday guy, playing games, chatting up the kids or just leaving them alone to enjoy a safe place as he enjoyed watching all walks of life get along.

"My kids are my life, and I wanted to make a difference," Cohn said. "It was such a great place. The community needs to open up for the kids that need it - and they can be scary to some - but we're in a huge community, and we should have supported this."

Still, Place personnel know that the seeds they've sown might sprout in ways they'll never see. Lori Koehler said she's talked to her friends about starting their own place for teens after she and the others graduate from college. For information about The Place, call 303-460-1551.