

JOYFUL LIVING: WHAT'S A COMMUNITY CENTER LOOK LIKE?

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Since the dawn of civilization, humans have been gathering around campfires, in shoguns, longhouses, henges and caves to build community.

Most often, the gatherings focused on daily needs, governing of the group and forming hunting and/or gathering parties. But there were also celebrations that included singing, dancing and storytelling. The lively gatherings focused on the survival and well-being of the group.

Today, the need still exists for man to gather in order to govern, celebrate and focus on survival and well-being, to build community. Across the U.S., there are 7,864 community parks, recreation centers and some 5,000 designated, identifiable community centers as gathering places to help us do so.

The Upper Keys have many parks that would qualify to be among the 7,864, among them John Pennekamp State Park, Founders Park, Jacobs Aquatic Center, Anne's Beach and Harry Harris Park. They all have one thing in common: Their recreational activities focus on water and water safety.

Although not among the large number of parks and recreation centers, we also have the Key Largo library, which provides books, after-school tutoring and mentoring. A large community room is used for art shows and various classes. Near the library is the Monroe County Senior Citizens Center funded by the Council on Aging, which provides lunches and a meeting space for seniors. Another organization that provides a gathering place in the Upper Keys is Just Older Youth Inc.

All of these organizations are vital but none of them is a community center. Just Older Youth's Wednesday gatherings at the JOY Center and the Key Largo library come closest to meeting the definition of one: "Community centers are identifiable public locations where members of a community meet for social, educational, recreational activities, public information and other purposes."

A thriving community center has three components. The first is funding, which comes from county funds, park and recreation funds, grants and donations. The second feature is identified space that is dedicated for the center, visible to the public and must be large enough to house offices, classes and meeting rooms. The last, and possibly the most important, is people – to develop and staff the center, and as participants.

The resources needed for a community center come from the community itself. Its development is usually driven by an initial group of people who have identified the need for a center. In the Upper Keys that group is JOY Inc. The members are currently circulating a petition to measure community interest, talking with public officials, compiling a proposal to present to the county for funding and hosting a matching donor campaign. Just Older Youth Inc. is working hard to create a gathering place — a community center — for Upper Keys citizens. They invite you to join them.



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More information is available at justolderyouthinc.org or via email to justolderyouthinc@gmail.com.



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