

Pike County Progressives Trial a Year-Round Gathering Spot

By Lauren Paul

With financial support and a lot of practical help from many dedicated volunteers – not to mention a boost from the mayor -- Delaware Valley Action! builds a community center for people to meet, share ideas and just be together.

Never underestimate the human drive for community. The urge to congregate is even more pressing in rural areas where liberal-minded folks are scarce. And when it comes to creating a center for Democratic-leaning citizens to gather and share information, it takes a village.

That's what Ed Gragert of [Delaware Valley Action!](#), a progressive non-profit, learned last year when the group set out to build a first-of-its-kind community engagement center in Milford, Penn., Pike County, located in the Commonwealth's extreme northeast corner.

DVA! last spring held a retreat where board members talked about the November 2022 election – what had gone well and what needed adjustment. All agreed it had been very helpful during that time to have a dedicated space for interaction and collaboration. An idea was born: Create a multifunctional space – paid for and staffed by local volunteers -- to serve as a hub for community connection, providing a welcoming environment for diverse groups and activities. As a 501(c)(4) organization, DVA! could devote only 49.9% of its efforts to political activities, but it could certainly promote the values of justice, respect, equality, food security, environmental integrity and constitutional rights.

“We were looking at how could we engage both our volunteers on an ongoing basis as well as different kinds of groups that may not yet be part of our progressive community,” says Gragert. “We thought we might be able to initiate some conversations with them if we met them where they are in their own clubs, groups and organizations.” For-profit groups and religious organizations will not be part of the mix.

Now, the brand-new DVA! Community Engagement center will host everything from a Mahjong club and Scouts troops to afterschool groups, book clubs and dance troupes. Gragert figures the community groups will be a source of revenue for using the space. He has not yet worked out much the suggested donation will be for groups, but it will be modest (on the order of \$50 for a three-hour event).

A Place for Like-Minded Citizens

Earlier this year when the board was looking at how to serve groups with limited resources, the first question was, essentially: Will the community show up (in person and with their wallets)?

“So, we started a campaign to test the waters in May of this year, after the primary, and said, ‘Let's see how many people we can enlist to donate on a monthly basis,’” says Gragert. The

group's leaders figured if they could get enough people to commit to recurring donations for the year, they could cover the rent and utilities. Later, with additional funding secured, they could stipend someone part-time to do coordination and scheduling.

A lucky break came from Milford's newly elected mayor, Sean Strub, who offered a 1,000-square-foot office space that was available with just one catch. It would need significant renovation, including building an accessible bathroom.

Gragert got some estimates for what the work would cost (those early numbers are always way too low, he cautions) and sent out an appeal for money and help to the DVA!'s 1,200-member mailing list. Within a few weeks, about 100 people committed to monthly donations that would cover the basic costs for the space. That left the cost of renovation.

"When we took out the carpeting, it cost a lot more than we expected to put down tiles that look like wood," recalls Gragert. Then there was the rewiring and painting and permitting that had to be done, in addition to buying or finding the right furniture. (Gragert quickly learned to be very pointed in community requests for furniture as it turns out people have a lot of unsuitable items they want to get rid of.)

Between some grants, one-time donations and auctioning off a donated baby grand piano (that brought in \$3,500), DVA! was able to pay for the renovation, which ran to about \$12,000. Community volunteers pitched in to do much of the labor.

In addition to the space for community groups and students, the Community Engagement Center also features a community swap function and a "free store" where people can pick up items including diapers, baby items, feminine hygiene products and cleaning supplies that are not available at the local food bank. The community might appear affluent demographically, says Gragert, but much need is hidden. "For example, In the food pantry in Milford, they're up to feeding 75 to 80 families per week in this very small community here."

No one will have to pledge allegiance to the Democratic party in order to hang out at the center, but its walls will feature some messaging that aligns with its values. "We want there to be a message so people who don't necessarily think of those issues all the time who are visually and otherwise presented with them," he says. And at election time, the staff will hand out fact sheets and endorse candidates. For example, the DVA! has endorsed Congressman Matt Cartwright (PA-08) for reelection.

Despite some sleepless nights and much schlepping furniture and boxes, Gragert says the journey has been fun. He's looking forward to a soft launch event for the DVA! Community Engagement Center on December 13. An official opening will come early in the new year.

As for his advice to his counterparts in rural areas that might be interested in starting a similar center, he advises starting small and making sure the monthly expenses are covered up front.

“Make sure you have a good-sized team of volunteers to help staff the center but also help identify other resources in the community,” says Gragert. “But also, make sure you've got enough money. Definitely make sure you have enough money.”

- If you'd like advice on how to replicate this model, and/or if you would like attend the December 13th Sneak Preview Launch, please send an email to delawarevalleyaction@gmail.com.
- Click here to contribute funds to the Community Engagement Center: <https://www.delawarevalleyaction.org/single-post/what-s-the-buzz-a-DVA!-community-engagement-center>.
- To donate needed items, visit the DVA! [Amazon Wish List](#).

Lauren Paul is a Boston-based writer.