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COMMUNITY

The Deck offers safe haven for local teens

By **Stephanie Thiessen**
 CANADIAN CHAMPION STAFF

Twenty-year-old Aaron Wagner knows better than most that life just isn't fair.

As a child, he lost his father to cancer. When he was 17, his mom died of a brain aneurysm. And just last October, his stepfather was taken by a heart attack.

The deaths, coupled with a household ravaged by alcohol, could have left him bitter and alone.

Instead, Wagner is happily looking forward to graduating from high school and pursuing his golf dream of going pro — all the while investing in young people at Milton's drop-in youth centre, The Deck.

Out of gratitude to the people who befriended and mentored him just a few years ago when he needed it most, Wagner wants to do the same for other teens in town.

He's one of many volunteers at The Deck, which is in the basement of Milton Bible Church, 200 Main St.

Since it opened last year, it's been attracting impressive numbers of high school students — up to 90 in one night. The centre provides a place on Thursday and Friday nights — from 7 to 10 p.m. and 7 to 11 p.m. respectively — for high school students to play pool, foosball and ping-pong, eat pizza or just hang out with friends.

"The youth know it as a safe place to go," said director Oliver Clarke.

Just this month, the centre — which is supported by various churches around town — expanded to include younger students. It's now open to students in grades 6 to 8 Mondays from 3:30 to 6:30 p.m.

Volunteers at The Deck aim to befriend the students, providing a listening ear and advice to help them make wise decisions.

"There's a problem with drugs and drinking and the youth need someone older to point them in the right direction and open another door," Clarke said.

There's no typical teen who attends. Some are straight laced, others have a rougher façade, Clarke said. From 'skids' to 'goths' to preppy kids, The Deck attracts them all.

On May 29, an open house for parents interested in checking out The Deck will take place from 6:30 to 8:30 p.m.

Financially, it's often difficult to get a new program off the ground, and The Deck is always looking for new ways to fundraise. Fortunately, local businesses have taken an interest, and organizers hope this will continue. The Deck recently received \$12,000 from Del Ridge Homes, and a much-needed freezer from Zellers.

Few people understand better than



GAME TIME: Above, Justin Easterbrook (left) and Travis Mayhew play a game of foosball at The Deck and Matthew Philips and Joanna Medeiros take a break from playing pool to watch. Inset left, Ginny Hardy (left) and Valerie Silvestri of Del Ridge Homes present a \$12,000 cheque to Oliver Clarke, director at The Deck.

GRAHAM PAINE / CANADIAN CHAMPION

Wagner just how important such a place is for teens, since he himself benefited from a similar centre just a few years ago.

In fact, Wagner said he doesn't know where he'd be if it weren't for a couple of people who reached out to him when it seemed his world was caving in.

A smile stretches across Wagner's face as he sits in an office at W.I. Dick School — where he's doing his high school co-op — and tells how he ended up in a place where his life has purpose and passion.

It was while Wagner was in grade 7, and dealing with his alcoholic mother and stepfather that he first started hanging out at X-cape, a local youth drop-in centre in town that's since shut down.

A couple of volunteers became mentors to him, including one who could relate to Wagner's home situation.

"Whenever I was freaking out about something, I could call him and he'd talk to me," Wagner said.

Around the same time, Trafalgar Golf and

Country Club donated a few free junior memberships to X-cape, and Wagner took up golf. It wasn't long before he was devoting every free moment to the sport, which made the drugs some of his friends were into seem less appealing.

After the membership ran out and he was old enough to work, Wagner took a job as a dishwasher with a local golf club so he could work on his game for free, and was soon traveling to tournaments and doing quite well. To this day, golf has given Wagner something positive to work toward. He's aiming for a golfing scholarship and plans to teach in the next few years.

Wagner said he wants to help provide similar opportunities for teens through The Deck.

Shortly after his stepfather passed away, Wagner became a Christian and finally filled the remaining void in his life, he said.

He explained his newfound faith provides him with yet another reason to want to help teens, sharing with them the hope he's

found.

Although he can't relate to every situation, "Pain is pain, and loss is loss," he said.

Currently, Wagner is helping organize a fundraising golf tournament for The Deck. It'll take place July 8 at Granite Ridge Golf Club at 1 p.m. and costs \$125 or \$40 for the dinner only.

Between finishing high school, volunteering at The Deck and playing golf, Wagner's busy, to say the least. But that's fine with him.

"Sometimes I don't even know where I find the energy. Then I know it's God getting me through the stuff. It's pretty sweet."

For more information about The Deck, to volunteer or make a donation, call (905) 876-0368 or e-mail thedeckmilton@gmail.com. To register or to make a donation for the golf tournament, call Wagner or Alan Herring at (905) 208-9249.

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Programming Schedule — Tuesday, May 16 - Tuesday, May 22, 2006

Tuesday, May 16	Wednesday, May 17	Thursday, May 18	Friday, May 19	Saturday, May 20	Sunday, May 21	Monday, May 22
1:00pm SportsZONE Live (Replay)	1:00pm Halton Hills Council May 9 2006	12:00pm Swap Talk (Replay)	1:00pm HCDSB: Celebration of Student Excellence	4:00pm TVCogeco Sports: Sr. Men's Baseball	10:30am TVCogeco Sports: Sr. Men's Baseball	1:00pm Halton Hills Council May 9 2006
5:00pm Plugged In! EXTRA	6:00pm The Bottom Line	1:00pm HCDSB: Sharing the Spirit Awards	2:00pm Halton Hills Council May 10, 2006	6:00pm - Midnight Plugged In! EXTRA	5:00pm Plugged In! EXTRA	4:00pm - Midnight Plugged In! EXTRA
6:00pm Plugged In! EXTRA	6:30pm - 8:00pm Plugged In! EXTRA	2:00pm-6:00pm Living Healthy	5:00pm Plugged In! EXTRA		6:00pm Halton Hills Council May 10 2006	
6:30pm Optimist TV Bingo (Live)	8:00pm Swap Talk (Live)	6:00pm The Bottom Line	6:00pm - 8:00pm Plugged In! EXTRA		9:00pm - Midnight Plugged In! EXTRA	
7:30pm Plugged In! EXTRA	9:00pm HCDSB: Sharing the Spirit Awards	7:00pm Plugged In! EXTRA	8:00pm Literacy North Halton's Grate Groan-Up Spelling Bee			
8:00pm Auto Experts (Live)	10:00pm-Midnight Plugged In! EXTRA	7:30pm - 8:30pm Plugged In! EXTRA	10:30pm-Midnight Plugged In! EXTRA			
9:00pm Halton Hills Council May 9, 2006		8:30pm HCDSB: Celebration of Student Excellence				
		9:30pm Halton Hills Council May 10, 2006				
		Midnight Plugged In! EXTRA				