

Local high school students to facilitate March 18 mayoral debate

by Cory Davenport, Contributing Writer
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ALTON - A new **Youth Engagement Program** being initiated by the **Alton Salvation Army Corps**, the **Alton YWCA** and the owner of a local business is helping empower high school students to find their voices in all areas of life - from creativity to local government.

Drug Free Alton Chairperson and Alton Salvation Army Kettle Coordinator Greg Gelzinnis said the Youth Engagement Program started its mission with poetry readings at **Today's Place**, a youth center built by **Ben Golley** and attached to his shop, **Today's Beauty Supply**, located at 1415 Central. Gelzinnis said the center provides teenagers with a place they can "loiter with permission." It has since developed into a teen-adult cooperative with the mission of getting young people more engaged with the community.

Perhaps the largest culmination of this mission will be a March 18, 2017, mayoral debate. Gelzinnis said the debate will be held at the Alton YWCA, located at 304 E. Third St. He said current **Alton Mayor Brant Walker** and his three opponents, **Joshua Young**, **Dan Rauschkolb** and **Scott Dixon**, were each invited to the debate, which will be completely facilitated by high school students.

"I would like to thank the new **YWCA Executive Director Dorothy Hamel** for all she is doing with this," Gelzinnis said. "At this point, Dixon and Walker have agreed, but I'm pretty sure they all will come. There's always been adult forums, but I think this may be the first time students have done one."

Gelzinnis said the administration of the Alton School District has been extremely cooperative with the initiative, saying the U.S. history and political science instructors have been helping students prepare for the debates. He said the English department has helped students prepare for poetry readings as well.

Those poetry readings are held at Today's Place, and Gelzinnis said students open their souls to each other, and shared their poetry with one another on Feb. 11, 2017. He said 18 students were in the facility, which he said could only hold as many as 30. Another poetry reading event is slated for Feb. 25, 2017 at the facility as well.

Besides the YWCA and Today's Place, Gelzinnis said the **Salvation Army Booth House**, located at 525 Alby, is also opening its basement to students who need a place to "loiter with permission." He said the former lieutenants of the booth house secured a grant to purchase and install professional grade coffee shop equipment in a basement area called "The Underground," which he said was in existence before the new venue on Broadway was conceived.

The idea was abandoned, however, and the equipment was re-gifted to a Salvation Army camp, which also did not utilize it. Gelzinnis got the equipment returned to the Booth House basement, and is in the process of restoring and installing it so the location can host a youth center he is tentatively calling "The 525," based on the address of the booth house.

The Youth Engagement Program is constantly looking for volunteers. Gelzinnis said anyone wanting to volunteer is invited to call him on his cell phone, at (618) 550-9291.

