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Fire Escape rocks for Christ

Venue's bands help plant seeds of love for Jesus

By Georgia Geis

The Arizona Republic
April 06, 2002

It is standing room only as the aggressive rap/rock band Pillar belts out lyrics about the joys of loving Jesus Christ. These songs aren't in any hymnal, but the message is the same.

The Fire Escape, a local Christian hangout for young people, has been going strong for five years.

National and Valley bands take the stage a couple times a month. The music of choice is punk, rap and alternative rock, the louder the better. The pop band Superchic(k), ska rockers the Dietrichs and 3rdE FS will play at 7 p.m. next Saturday at 2532 W. Morningside Drive, Phoenix.

"We believe we are planting seeds," said Wesley Butler, 24, the coffeehouse's manager.

The Fire Escape, part of the youth outreach services at Pure Heart Christian

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Fellowship, was the brainchild of church member Marie Whiting. Whiting and the high school youth group envisioned a safe-haven coffeehouse for young people ages 14 to 24.

From the beginning, Fire Escape was for youths and run by youths. The first show was held in a small youth room in the Pure Heart church and drew about 40 people. The venue soon moved to an annex used for different ministries.

Fire Escape now attracts music fans from across the Valley, as well as Flagstaff and Tucson. It often has sellout crowds of 400.

It was remodeled in December to look like a "small village" with elaborate 3D backdrops of Gus' gas station, a bank, Samson's barber shop and, of course, a firehouse. The one-way sign on the wall points up to heaven.

"You know that you are safe and you will meet cool people," said volunteer Katie Stangler, 18, of Tonopah.

Stangler, a freshman studying graphic design at Estrella Mountain Community College, has been a member at Pure Heart for six years. She didn't go to a show until about 1 1/2 years ago, but from that moment she was hooked.

In charge of audience relations and sending e-mail notices, Stangler is one of about 35 Fire Escape volunteers.

Butler, who lives in Tempe and studies electrical engineering at Arizona State University, has delegated most managerial tasks, preparing for the inevitable day he must step down as the manager.

"We want to be a place of positive influence," Butler said. "We want to make people feel accepted."

During shows, people sometimes take the stage to give their testimony to Christ. Butler has noticed that many of the youths attending a show at the Fire Escape will check out other services at Pure Heart Christian Fellowship.

Information: (602) 866-8850 or <http://www.thefireescape.org/>.

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