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## FIRST PERSON

# Youth Center Provides Teens Safe Place

**A young man tells of his experience with a drop-in center**



*Youth playing chess at the Ashgabat Youth Center.*

***I thought of starting smoking, but I changed my mind after the trainings about the hazards of smoking and drugs. Listening to music or walking is more relaxing than smoking.***

—Daniel Makarov

I first came to the center in October 2011. It was a stormy day, and my feelings toward the world around me were as stormy as the weather outside. I was completely worn-out by problems in my personal and business lives. I am not used to friendliness from my peers, as I live in a dog-eat-dog world. All my peers living in my neighborhood relieve their stress by smoking, using drugs or drinking alcohol.

I was surprised when everybody in the center greeted and asked me “How are you doing?” I was really touched by it. In spite of the bad weather, we had a great time playing games and dancing in the hall.

The next day, I came back. Since then I spend all my free time here in this center. I gather with new friends to play chess. Chess is my deep passion.

Before I couldn't find a partner to play with as my mom is always busy with her housework and my neighborhood peers think chess is junk. That's why I was glad to find chess boards and people enjoying playing chess here. We play chess almost every day and compete often.

All the trainings, friendly attitudes of my peers, and the center's staff changed my life completely. I am no longer the aggressive and egotistical person as I was before. I like being in my peers' company. I am not indifferent to people and their problems and am now ready to help if they need. Every day I go to the center, as I know it's a place where everybody is glad to see me and waits for me, and where I can fulfill myself through sharing my experience and knowledge with others.

I like my friends, I like my life, and I like myself.

Photo: JSI