SHOWCASE

YOUTH MOVEMENT
"60s ROCKER DRUMS UP NEW MEMBERS TO REVITALIZE 93-YEAR-OLD CLUB.

STORY BY SAM STALL

Ray Kepler is in his mid-60s, but the former musician and ex-hippie is still young at heart. He’s worked hard to impart that same mojo to the Fort Collins, Colorado, Kiwanis Club, by raising its profile among the area’s teens, 20-somethings and 30-somethings.

“IT’s the future,” says Kepler. “But I think most people in my age bracket just don’t see how to connect with young people. They make it tough on themselves. But if you just hang out around them, you’ll find they’re very open-minded people.”

Spreading this gospel didn’t come quickly or easily for Kepler, a former rock drummer who played with the band the Willo-bees. He joined the Fort Collins club 17 years ago, then watched its membership dwindle from approximately 50 to six. Clearly something had to be done—and soon.

“One of my club mentors charged me on his deathbed not to let the club die,” he recalls.

Kepler initiated a recovery plan during his three-year stint as president. Recognizing the need to attract more youthful members, he approached pretty much every young professional who seemed even remotely interested in community service. Slowly the work paid off, and the club brought in a cadre of youngsters who have dropped the Fort Collins club’s average age into the 30s, while bumping up its membership to 23.

The 24th member is Krista Churchill, a 49-year-old teacher at nearby Fort Collins High School and a firsthand witness to the club’s youth movement. She had a front-row seat thanks to a two-year stint as advisor to her school’s Key Club.

“I joined because of the people and what they do,” Churchill says. “The impact they have on the community is very moving. I want to be a part of that.”

She also appreciates her club’s strategy of pairing Key Clubbers with Kiwanians, in hopes of forging strong bonds to the group that will last into adulthood. It’s an approach that Kepler and the rest of his club have taken up with almost missionary zeal.

“He’s still young at heart, and he sees how important it is to connect with young people and get them turned on to volunteerism and service,” Churchill says of Kepler.

The efforts of the Fort Collins club have created an ever-increasing pool of youngsters for them to work with. Most tellingly, the roughly 40-strong membership of Churchill’s high school Key Club now handily outnumbers that of its sponsoring Kiwanis chapter. If even a portion of those kids one day become full-fledged Kiwanians, the future is indeed bright. Churchill certainly thinks so.

“As we’re grooming our high school students and then moving them into college, I think that after college, becoming a Kiwanis member would be a natural progression,” she says.