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Fourth-grader RJ Peshek shoots pool with Aspen Youth Center co-director Keith Berglund, while Durgan Soderberg looks on. Admission to the center, located in the Aspen Recreation Center, will be free beginning June 1.

Jeanne McGovern/The Aspen Times

ASPEN — Admission to the Aspen Youth Center will be free beginning June 1, marking the first time in several years that local and visiting kids won't have to pay to play.

"This is great news for all of us," said Keith Berglund, co-director of the Aspen Youth Center. "It helps bring the Youth Center back to its mission, which is providing a safe and fun place for kids to spend their days."

According to Berglund, an anonymous donor has agreed to cover all program costs for one year — a contribution in the ballpark of \$12,000 to \$16,000. In the past, students in grades 4-12 have had to pay \$6 per day for full-day admission to the AYC, located in the Aspen Recreation Center.

While \$6 may seem reasonable for a full day of admission and associated activities, Berglund and the AYC board believe it was a hindrance to many families.

"In these tough economic times, \$6 a day adds up," Berglund said, adding that last summer the AYC tallied 2,700 visits, which was the slowest summer in his three years as co-director. "We think a lot of families either struggled with the admission fee, or it was a situation where mom or dad wasn't working as much so there was no need to find outside activities for their kids."

And while the AYC did offer scholarship assistance to cover admission fees, Berglund believes people were hesitant to apply.

With the new funds, the time he and his staff spent administering scholarships can now be spent on the kids.

"This is perhaps the biggest benefit," he said. "Now we can go back to being with the kids and thinking of new activities and programs. That's what we're experts at."

Though the anonymous donor's gift is for only one year, Berglund said the bar is now set, and admission will most likely remain free in perpetuity. (There may still be fees for some field trips, but scholarships will remain available, and kids can earn work-study "AYC bucks" by "doing something for someone else or for yourself" to be put toward such extras.)

"This donor committed for 12 months, and our hope is to use this to facilitate future donations of this type," he said. "No matter what, we can't go back and forth on this ... so admission will now be free and we will just make it part of our fundraising goal to keep it that way."

In fact, returning to free admission has been a goal of the AYC since it began charging in 2007.

"When the Youth Center was originally founded, admission was free. And when we started having to charge, the intention was always to get it back to being free," said Berglund, adding that fees were first charged when the AYC moved from the building behind the Pitkin County Courthouse to the ARC. The fees gradually grew from \$1 per day to the current \$6. "And while admission fees are not a huge income source for us, because essentially everybody who comes in is subsidized to some degree, it is great to be able to get back to our core mission of access for everyone."

The AYC currently raises approximately \$300,000 annually through a letter-writing campaign and special events like the 12 Hours of Snowmass and Cirque d'Aspen. The nonprofit's total annual budget is around \$450,000.

The Aspen Youth Center is open Monday-Friday, 9 a.m. to 6 p.m., for kids entering fourth grade through 12th grade. More information is available at www.aspenyouthcenter.org.