

Hitting it off

Growing Highland club gives teens of varied abilities a chance to create friendships that are truly special

by **Deanne Probst**

If necessity is the mother of invention, Pat Leseman and Rosemary Fagrelus have given birth to more than just two special sons with disabilities. The two women, both of them residents of Highland Park, have nurtured the Highland residents of Friendship Club from its infancy in May 2002 to its current stage of maturity, which includes a new board of directors, increasing financial support and the hiring of its first part-time director.

"Rosemary and I were sitting at her kitchen table, looking at each other and wondering what we were going to do with our boys over the summer," Leseman said. "School would be out in a couple of weeks. We pulled out a calendar and began to fill it in—parks and rec, summer concerts, a walking club. That was the birth of the Highland Friendship Club."

The club has come a long way in three short years. Today's Friendship Club provides ways for about 60 physically and mentally disabled for about 60 get out and socialize with others their own age. Members can choose from a long list of athletic and social programs, creative activities and service projects. (A full list is posted on its Web site at highlandfriendshipclub.homestead.com.)

Funds from the Highland most Club helped get things off the ground. Club support has since come from the Leseman,

Bank Community Involvement Fund, Bremer Foundation, St. Paul Foundation, the city of St. Paul, the University of Minnesota's Institute on Community Integration, and Renee and Fred Pritzker, among others.

The nonprofit organization also has obtained private donations through fundraising events. The group held its first formal gala in mid-November and drew a big crowd.

When Leseman and Fagrelus formed the club, they were just trying to do something to help their two teen-aged sons. "We didn't want to be recreational directors," Fagrelus said. "We just wanted our kids to have opportunities to socialize and develop friendships."

friendship issues "weren't a problem" in grade school, Fagrelus said, "but in junior high, the divide starts and gets wider and wider through high school. The friendship piece where you call someone on the phone and hang out with them doesn't happen for some of these kids."

In time, help was sought to run the club and enable Leseman and Fagrelus to take a step back. Enter college students Katie and Dusty Thune, whose special-education degrees come in handy when planning and staffing events. A strong relationship with Cretin-Derham Hall has supported some of the club's most significant programs.

The club's new board of directors includes Leseman, Fagrelus, Cretin-Derham Hall teacher Paul Nyberg, Jim LeDuc of the St Paul



Charlie Jenkins, 13, left, and Danny Totten, 16, practice singing "Silent Night" for the Friendship Club concert.



Jessa Bender, 15, assists brother David, 19, during a recent rehearsal at Cretin-Derham Hall for the Friendship Club's holiday concert. *Photos by Brad Stauffer.*

Public Schools, Shelly Harris of the Highland Business Association and Alisha Johnson of Highland Bank. Local leaders such as St. Paul City Council member Pat Harris also bring ideas and expertise to the group.

Mary McKeown of Merriam Park was KJrori this month as the club's first part-time

something they're not," she said. "They don't want to turn into a bureaucracy. The parents of these kids have been dealing with bureaucracies since day one; the last thing they need is another one. They just want to teach their kids social and living skills. The Friendship Club showcases what a community of people

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can do when they're determined.'

One of those people is Renee Pritzker of Summit Hill, whose son Jake attended Highland Park Junior and Senior highs with Lese-man's and Fagrelus' sons.

"Jake's been in the Friendship Club since the beginning and it's been absolutely wonderful. It's his social base, his circle of friends," Pritzker said. "Jake is attuned to the rhythms of family life and he loves having his own activities and friends. He'd rather go off on his own to these activities and not have his parents along. He's 20; he has his own life. He's just like any of our other kids of that age.

"That's the whole point: community in-

volvement," Pritzker continued. "All of us have raised our children as full members of their community. This is where they live. We like the fact that our kids can walk in local businesses and be known by name, and have community members look out for them when they're with staff or their own families.

"Young adults with disabilities have a difficult time building and maintaining social contacts," Pritzker said. "The Friendship Club gives them those opportunities. The club also connects parents who are going through the same things. All of these kids are so supportive and caring of each other. It's just an amazing experience."