

Runaways find Sanctuary

By CAROLINE PRICE

At first glance, 14-year-old Barbara doesn't seem different from any other teenager living in Birmingham. Her jeans are appropriately patched and faded, and she wears a halter top, the upper part of a teenage girl's summer ensemble.

But Barbara, who prefers not to reveal her identity, is different. Last week she ran away from home, and she says she never wants to go back.

A 14-year-old girl alone on the streets can run into a lot of trouble. Young runaways are the victims of crimes ranging from drugs to prostitution.

Barbara's fate is a happier one. Instead of a self-imposed exile in some unsavory crash pad she found a sanctuary.

THE SANCTUARY seems an appropriate name for the home for runaways in Pleasant Ridge. During its two years of existence it has served as a temporary home for 302 teenagers like Barbara.

According to Lisa Kaichen, the center's 25-year-old director, runaways have come to the Sanctuary from all over the county area. Most of these clients are not hard-core juvenile delinquents, and usually the only crime they are guilty of is running away.

"Our average client is 15, female, in high school and usually comes from a divided family or step-parent in the home," Ms. Kaichen says.

"Often she is the oldest child, and her problem has existed over six months. The Sanctuary is usually the first contact," the director adds.

Most of the runaways served have had no contact with the law. Their problems are usually family- or school-based. "When report cards come out we're very busy," Ms. Kaichen says.

BUT A RUNAWAY who comes to the center will find that it is not a place to hide from the trouble that caused his flight from home. The Sanctuary's most important function is counseling. "The client must want help," Ms. Kaichen says.

"We have daily individual counseling for the youngster, and group counseling at night."

At these sessions, teen-agers examine their problems and play values clarification games like "Out of Arms." In this game the runaway divides a coat of arms into six squares. In each square goes a drawing of what the runaway considers to be his greatest achievement, his family's greatest accomplishment, what makes him happiest or three things he would like said about himself if he were to die.

"We do a lot of goal-setting," Ms. Kaichen says.

Some time during his stay, which can be no longer than 15 days, the runaway must face his parents. In fact, parental permission is one of the prerequisites for a Sanctuary client. "We try to have two parent counseling sessions a week, and at least one family session," Ms. Kaichen says.

At these family sessions, the runaway and his parents draw up a contract. "Often this contract consists of little things—like if you let me wear my hair the way I want, I'll take out the trash with us being asked," the director says.

THE GOAL of this counseling is to get the teenager back home, and 87 percent do return. But sometimes the youngsters don't go home because they aren't wanted. "We get a fair amount of throw-away kids," Ms. Kaichen says.

"If the parents won't take the child back we have to file a petition charging them with child neglect," she adds.

Ms. Kaichen continues, "What shocks me are adoptive parents that have been there for years. You'd think after all the screening they go through to adopt, this wouldn't happen."

The Sanctuary, which receives 87 percent of its support from the state dept. of social services, has gained a growing community acceptance.

Some police departments make referrals to us," Ms. Kaichen says. "They have recognized that once they take someone home for the 15th time that family needs help. Some parents actually drop their kids off here," she adds.

According to the director, schools also try to cooperate. "We try to arrange transportation to the youngster's own school," she says.

The center also has a highly qualified staff. Counselors must have a minimum of a bachelor's degree in a social science field. House parents are on hand during the night.

A teenager hopefully leaves the Sanctuary with a better grasp on life. And he has to have a pretty good reason to come back. "You have to have a different problem to come back," Ms. Kaichen says. "We don't want running away to serve as a means to manipulate the parents."

"I FEEL SOME of the things we offer the teenager have a long range effect, like knowing what services exist, developing self-esteem and teaching the client to trust adults," she says. "But I don't think two weeks is long enough."

Sanctuary counselors usually refer teens with drug or pregnancy problems to other organizations where they can receive specialized help. The center also tries to do follow-up after a year on each teenager.



LISA KAICHEN

Although the Sanctuary has a good success rate with most of the runaways it serves, a real problem still exists for the ones that don't go home.

John Dowsett, assistant director of juvenile services for Oakland County, says, "Places like the Sanctuary are the latest trend. They are aids for certain kinds of youngsters, but not those inclined to stay on the street."

He adds, "And it is fair to assume that youngsters on the street have to turn to crime to support themselves. They may well become victims of crime or turn to prostitution and drugs."

ACCORDING TO Dowsett, a new trend in runaways seems to be appearing. "Tra-

ditionally runaways have come from the more affluent homes. Recently they seem to come from a more general background."

Oakland County is making an effort to treat runaways with understanding rather than as criminals. The county has a program that tries to avoid taking the runaway to court. According to Dowsett, youngsters who are runaways may be detained at Oakland County's Children's Village where they will receive counseling. Better yet, the program tries to get the youngster back home while awaiting a court hearing.

"The service is intensive," Dowsett says. "Dowsett also recognizes that there is no simple answer to solving the runaway's dilemma. 'Runaways have been a problem since time immemorial. Some kids run away on a lark. Others have a very good reason.'"

Ms. Kaichen agrees. "There used to be a kind of glamour to running away. But the pressures on teenagers are much greater now. A lot of our clients want independence, have alcoholic parents or suffer from physical or sexual abuse. But they still find it a rude awakening when they have to live on the street."

EVEN THE TEENAGERS who are runaways find a kind of relief at having a place like the Sanctuary. Tom is one of the runaways at the center and has begun to reflect that life at home may not be that bad. "I guess I'm lucky my dad wants me back," he says. This is the fourth time Tom has run away from his Detroit home.

"Sometimes it seems like everything I do is wrong," he comments sadly.

But things are looking up for Tom. "I just got a job, and I think I'll be able to handle my problems better," he says.

"After a while you run out of places to go."

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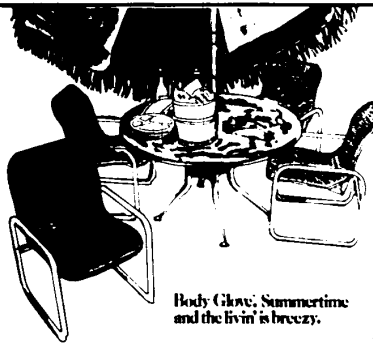
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