

## Group Homes — Learning to Live . . .

Joyce Rapp, a Rochester area freelance writer, has published previous work on happenings at St. Joseph's Villa.

By JOYCE RAPP

Nester Street could be considered a typical city street. Neat, middle-aged, middle-sized homes whose mortgages are paid by middle-income families line its sides. Curbs, street lights, fences and groomed junipers make it the usual urban neighborhood . . . with one exception.

On a corner, a large frame and brick home sprawls across the north side of the intersection. It is obviously a family home where kids should be banging through doors and hanging out the dormer windows which jut from the roof line. And it is.

Six boys ranging from 12 to 19 years old call it home. However, only two are brothers and the



Time for chess

parents who shepherd this flock are parents in name and interest only. That is because this is a Group Home, one of three (the other two are on St. Paul Street and Canterbury Road) owned and directed by St. Joseph's Villa, a foster care facility. And the 19 boys in these homes are Villa alumni who cannot return to their own homes because of family difficulties and have not been placed in foster care. Yet, each has earned his passport to community involvement in school and social activities.

For example, there is Jim, one of seven children whose father left the state and whose mother is mentally incapable of caring for the family. With the exception of the oldest son, the rest of the children were placed at the Villa. Eventually, three were placed in foster care, and Jim was ready for a Group Home where he is now thriving on snack privileges, a paper route and weight lifting sessions with his house father.

There also is Steve, a Rosey Crier 16-year-old who has been institutionalized for the past seven years. Steve is the product of a "sometimes marriage" whose father didn't "father" when his mother died several years ago.

As a result of a court order, Steve was sent to the Villa where he experienced for the first time the security of behavior boundaries. After five years of counseling, Steve transferred to a Group Home.

Since his ambition is to cock a tall chef's hat over one eye, Steve divides his school day between the local high school and a cooking course at the Rochester School Annex, a city BOCES program. At mealtimes though, he can be found in the kitchen adding a pinch of salt or a final stir to the spaghetti sauce.

Although Steve enjoys adding his personal stir to the sauce, meals are planned and made by the house mother.

At the Nester Street home, for instance, Mary Anne Graham tapes the week's menu to the refrigerator door.

She said, "I try and plan meals that are favorites of the kids and usually, they're happy with them. But, you know, what's one man's meat is another man's . . ."

"So," Mary Anne added, "during a vacation week last summer, each boy was allowed to cook his favorite meal. It sounds disastrous but it was great. Since some of our boys are from different cultures, we had a chance to enjoy their food, too."

Most mothers would wince at the baked-on-glopped-up carnage wrought by such a culinary experiment.

However, at a Group Home, each member has household responsibilities, charges, which are rotated each week. They include: bathroom scouring, KP, vacuuming, and the garage and basement detail. And like any large family, each boy is responsible for maintaining reasonable order in his bedroom.

According to the house father, Tom Graham, "Neatness isn't a big problem at our house. My big worry is getting the kids involved in the community. I am constantly looking for outside interests for them. In fact, right now, I am trying to get them V scholarships."

"As far as neatness goes, if a boy slips up too often, I take away his snacks for a few days but not fruit or milk, they need the vitamins and he's back in line again."

Tom's emphasis on vitamins and the whole physical fitness spectrum isn't too surprising.

Built like a large economy size Namath, he played football at Allegheny College where he

Photos by Ben Susso



Time out for a snack

majored in sociology. However, besides loading the refrigerator with 15 gallons of milk per week, weightlifting and acting as assistant coach for the high school football team, Tom's major function is helping the boys grow spiritually, mentally, emotionally and physically.

He explained, "When the Villa staff feels a boy is ready for a Group Home, he has already demonstrated that he is emotionally ready to



Indoor chore

leave the Villa and handle the freedom and responsibilities of a Group Home."

Since the Villa cares for ego-damaged children . . . uprooted children who carry the burden of guilt and rejection for their rootlessness . . . the transfer is made slowly.

He first visits the Home for a few days where he is conducted on a grand tour, plays with the boys and listens to the rules: 9 p.m. curfew, 10:45 bedtime, no long distance calls and respect for the privacy and possessions of others, of don't wear anyone else's socks without asking.

If he appears compatible with the boys and rules, his suitcase is packed for the move.

During the first few months, there is a honeymoon period where the novice savors home-style living. At the Nester Street home, Tom Graham has explained his values to the newcomer.

"You be honest with me and I'll be honest with you. We'll work together and hopefully, through working together, we'll care for each other."

Since communication is a vital tool in solving behavior problems, this will be the first of many talk sessions.

But when a temper explodes or yesterday's socks are still under the bed, the honeymoon is over.

"That," Tom said, "is when you're dealing with the kid where he's really at. His whole psychological configuration. Working with these kids is like painting a picture. Each experience you share with them is another brush stroke to the total picture."

Can the total picture also include post-high school education for the institutionalized child? Since St. Joseph's Villa did not open the doors of its first Group Home until 1966 (the first in the area), it is too soon to compile statistics.

However, the Syracuse University cheerleaders are raving for their football team's Glen Williams, a Villa and Group Home graduate. And recently, high school senior Larry received his letter of acceptance from Cortland-Tompkins Community College.

But two years ago, the Villa staff and most of all, Larry, never dreamed he would ever wear a college freshman beanie.

At that time, Larry moved to the Villa campus. Although a good-looking 17-year-old,

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