



Covenant House: A First-Hand Report

By Lawrence Kurmis

The Day Shift At the Under-21 Crisis Center

Lawrence Kurmis is a Rochesterian who has worked at Covenant House in New York City for more than a year. He attended St. John Fisher College and Becket Hall for two years. He will be moving to Toronto to help open a crisis center there, as part of Covenant House. His twin, James, also works at the New York City center.

Second of a three-part series

Walking into the 41st Street reception area at 8:30 a.m., I see Don behind the desk taking phone calls and answering questions of kids who stop by. Breakfast finished 10 minutes ago and the kids are moving along to "t.c.b." (street jargon meaning take care of business):

Going from the "B" building, where there are two big lounges, I notice about 80 kids milling around waiting for the morning meeting.

The shift supervisor, Mike, keeps the meeting short and direct. Instructions are simple. Everyone 16 and younger goes up to their floors for counseling or to the Under-21 school. Youths 17 and older who have already seen their counselors will beat the pavement looking for jobs. Pregnant girls and children go to their floor where a special program has been designed.

Meeting over, I grab my planning book from the counselor's office and start finding who's assigned to my floor. The elevator takes 14 of us so I can do my favorite task — casework.

Casework is the one-on-one communication between the counselor, social worker, or vocational counselor and the youth. If the youth's parents can be reached, which is rare, they are asked to provide information on how the child acted at home. When the youth says he or she is a victim of abuse they are sent to our medical department for an examination before we consider contacting their parents. Social agencies such as the Special Services for Children, the police department and the probation department are also contacted if they have an interest in the youth's welfare. All information is evaluated by the staff to assist in planning for the youth's future.

Shawn (not his real name), a 19-year-old who ran away from his father in Georgia, is the first guy I talk to. First I scan his file. It instructs me to call his aunt and uncle who live on Long Island to see if he can stay with them.

Small and skinny for his age, Shawn has no problem in talking about his family life. His father never loved him and often beat him up. As soon as "my sister was old enough she ran away," Shawn said. He simply followed in her footsteps.

Shawn called his relatives and arranged to visit them that afternoon. After he finished talking to his aunt, I spoke with her. She told me that Shawn had good reason to leave his father. The boy never got any love at home. Whatever you can do will be greatly appreciated, she said.

Earl came in next. Looking more like a 12-year-old, Earl, 15, talked with a childlike simplicity and honesty. Earl said he ran away from an institution the night before because two other kids beat him up and made him do things he didn't want to do.

After some counseling, I arranged for Earl to see

one of Under-21's social workers as soon as possible. They are experienced with juvenile programs and would be able to determine what would be best for Earl.

Youths keep coming into the office and we bring out plans for the day. One has two job leads. Another has an appointment with an Army recruiter. A third must face up to seeing his mother because he stole money from her.

Don calls from downstairs and says to bring the kids down for lunch. Chili over rice is the meal. With me wielding the serving spoon as fast as I can, the line moves quickly.

A game of mine encourages the kids to share their names with me. The game is simple. I make a deal with the kid I am serving lunch. I promise to remember his or her name if they will remember mine. Later in the day I check back with them to see how well they remember.

The young people feel good about themselves when someone makes it a point to know them as individuals. All too often, our kids are products of broken homes and institutions that cannot or will not give them the love and affection they so desperately need. This simple yet positive gesture of recognizing who they are helps build up their self-image.

After an hour of serving lunch, I relieve Charlie, the 40th Street receptionist, so he can eat. While sitting at the desk, a well-dressed man comes in and asks for a 16-year-old named Maria. I asked if the man was related to her. He said he was just a friend who wished to see her. I politely, yet firmly, told him only family members were allowed to see our youths. I asked if he cared to leave a message. He said no. As he left, he hurled some verbal abuses at me.

The shift supervisor said he was probably a pimp trying to get back one of his girls. Fortunately, I

stand six-foot-three, which helps to discourage most undesirables from starting trouble.

Following my stint at reception, I go into the "A" lounge and notice a young Hispanic girl looking troubled.

"Hello, my name is Larry. What's yours?"

"Angela."

"What's the problem, Angela?"

"I hate waiting. Everyone tells me to wait. I'm bored waiting to hear from the Job Corps."

"Try to understand that these things take time. Becoming frustrated doesn't help. Instead, think of something you can do today which will help you to stop watching the clock. People donate some pretty good paperbacks. Check with your counselors to see if they need help in straightening your floor."

"Thanks for the thought."

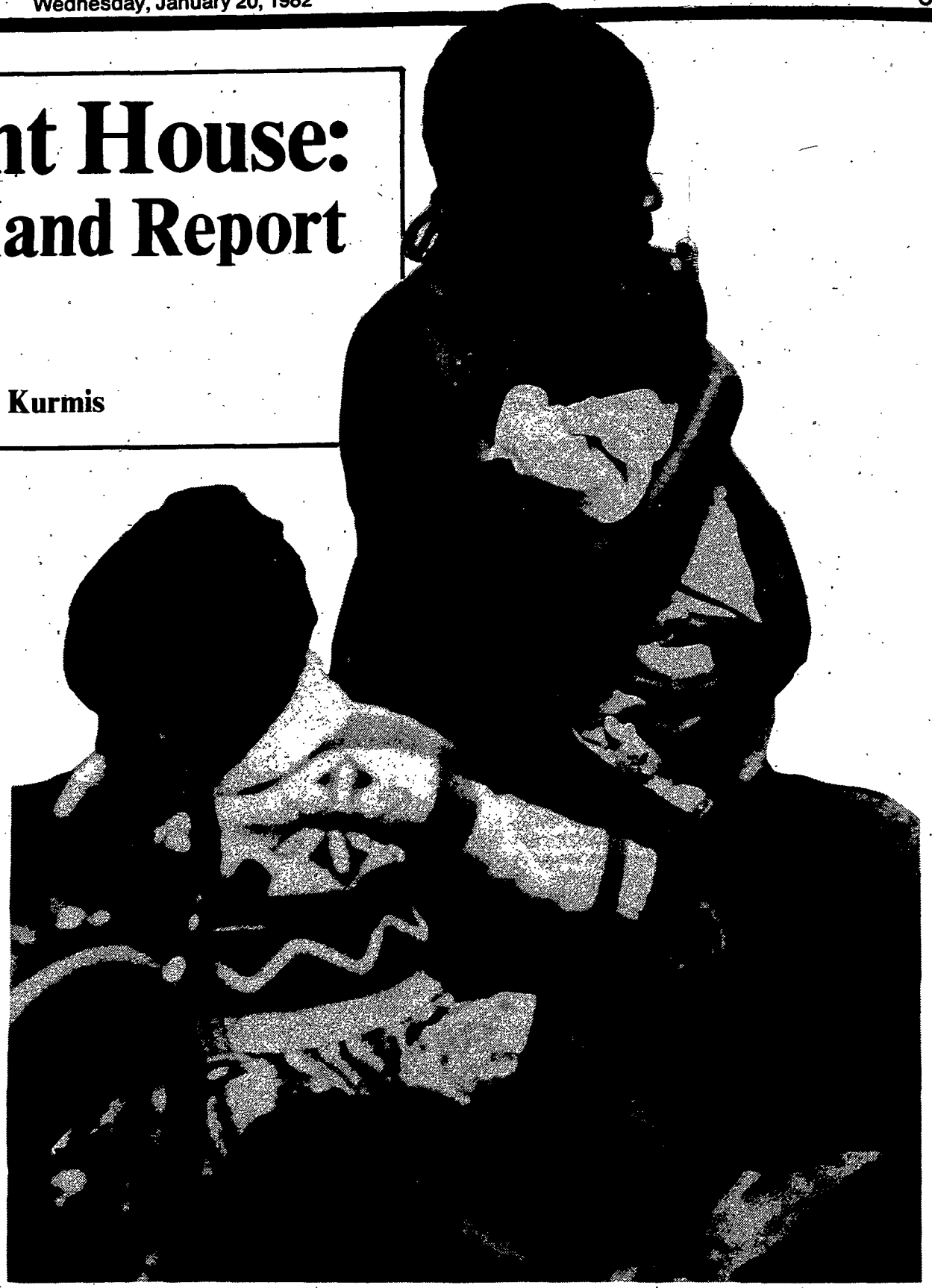
"I'll see you tomorrow."

Building rapport and trust with a young person is one of the counselor's biggest challenges. Most young people need time before they open up. Since a number of our kids come from the street, where one survives by distrusting everyone, time and understanding are needed to undo this suspicious approach to life.

The rest of the afternoon consists of placing phone calls and seeing kids I missed in the morning.

Another shift is over. Another eight hours of trying to give our kids a second chance. Just enough time to get to the community for Mass and to pray for the kids in the center — and those still on the streets.

NEXT WEEK: The power of prayer is not neglected.



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