

CYO satellite office seeks to cool the heat on Genesee Street

By Teresa A. Parsons

When Wanda Cowart says it's going to be a long, hot summer, she's not talking about the weather. She is talking about the friction between Genesee Street youths, police, residents and business owners.



Already this season, 14 youths have been arrested for attacking a police car in the neighborhood, and police report a resurgence of gang activity, particularly in Rochester's northeast and southwest areas.

Cowart, project coordinator for the Catholic Youth Organization's new southwest satellite office, believes people have over-reacted to youths hanging out on Genesee Street. Some business owners have complained, she said, but the strongest reactions have come from people from outside the area who were passing through.

"There are more kids this summer," she acknowledged, "but the majority are just hanging out, not causing trouble. They don't have anywhere to go."

Cowart is not sure of the reasons for the trouble, but believes that a 40-percent unemployment rate among black teen-agers may

have something to do with it.

Through its new satellite office, the CYO and Cowart are working to find young people jobs to keep them from becoming involved in vandalism and violence.

"Kids want something to do. They need a release in the summertime," Cowart said. "We're trying to bridge the gap between kids and businesses in the area. There are jobs here that no one has touched." She offered Strong Memorial and St. Mary's hospitals, and Olympic Amusement Park as examples of potential job sites.

Some employers claim that young people don't want to work for minimum wages anymore, Cowart said, adding that such charges are true — in part.

"They don't want to, but they will," she said. "Especially if you're 14 or 15, you're lucky to find a job. There are people (laid-off) from Kodak working for minimum wage."

Beyond searching for summer jobs, Cowart wants to help young people assess their long-term goals. "They want jobs, but what they might need is to continue their education or job preparation," she said. "I can get them jobs at Burger King and McDonald's, but that's not going to make them happy for long."

So she bargains with dropouts and potential dropouts, telling them "I'll get you a job if you finish school somehow."



Jeff Goulding/Courier-Journal

Most of the young people who frequent Genesee Street in the summer are looking for something to do, not for trouble, according to Wanda Cowart, project coordinator of the CYO's Southwest Satellite Office. She hopes to satisfy some of their needs with job referrals, workshops and counseling.

Funded this year by the City of Rochester and the United Way, the CYO's southwest satellite office at 500 Genesee Street opened April 1. Since then, 76 young people between the

ages of 14 and 25 have contacted Cowart.

The first was Eric Armstrong, 24. Fired from his last job in April, he lost his apartment in the 19th Ward and moved in with his family on Joseph Avenue. "I'm looking for anything that comes along — cleaning up, maintenance or outside work," he said. "That's what I'd really like to do. But so far, it's been two weeks, and nothing's come up yet."

Meanwhile, he continues to fill out applications and make phone calls. "I'm not discouraged," he said. "You just have to keep trying."

Armstrong's prospects may well be better than those of young people going it alone. "A person applying for a job has a better chance going through the CYO," Cowart explained. "It's one of the largest employment agencies for youth. People automatically associate it with service for youth."

Yet, with only Cowart and a part-time secretary on staff, the CYO southwest office can provide few direct services, relying on referrals to other agencies. But Cowart sees plenty of room for growth. "I see it expanding to do way above what the program is doing now," she said. In the fall, the office will sponsor a series of workshops with representatives of area businesses talking to youth about careers.

Cowart also plans to offer youths and their parents workshops on communication, career choices and job-hunting skills. "You find a lot of parents are busy because they're working. But we want to stress that they need to spend time with their kids," she said.

Eventually, she hopes to increase the office's staff to include a job developer and employment, personal and vocational counselors.

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CYO executive strives to end group's identity crisis



In a recent evaluation, the United Way described the Catholic Youth Agency (CYO) as "a little jewel" — a small agency, but extremely well-run.

To Jana Dodson, the agency's new executive director, that's high praise indeed. At 33, she has devoted most of her career to the often thankless task of program administration.

"I don't get a lot of feedback, but I believe I can do more for kids by making programs function," she said. "When a business service agency is well-managed, the staff can concentrate on doing their work and not on whether they get a paycheck."

As the CYO's program director for youth employment services for the past four years, Dodson wrote grants and helped develop such programs as the CYO Southwest Satellite Office and the Hispanic Youth Employment Program. Last March, she was named acting

executive director of the CYO, replacing Joyce Strazzaboso, who left to become president and chief executive officer of the Hemophilia Center. Three months later, Dodson was appointed executive director.

She inherits an agency that has transcended a lingering image as a sports and recreation program for mostly white, middle-class Catholic youths. The trend began back in 1976/77, when the agency was reorganized and shifted toward city and minority youth, and youth development in addition to recreation programs.

Today, more than half of the young people the CYO serves are black or Hispanic. And in addition to basketball, softball and chess, the agency offers the CYO offers employment training services for the general public, youth employment services, job placement and vocational training and counseling, Hispanic Youth Employment, and a resource referral network (the Job Helpline).

Although few actual changes were made in day-to-day operations, Dodson notes, the CYO was also caught up in

the renewal of the diocesan Division of Social Ministry. Along with the rest of the CYO staff, she has devoted considerable time and energy to that transition for the past few years. Nevertheless, with the help of more than 200 parish-based volunteers, the agency's 13 full-time and two part-time staff last year served more than 2,000 individuals.

If its strength stems from diversity, Dodson also believes the CYO's wide-ranging programs have continued to suffer from a major identity crisis. Different segments of the community are still aware of only parts of what the CYO offers. In some parishes, she says, it is still viewed as just a sports program. Some city youths substitute it with job alone.

"Some people see the 'Catholic' and think we stop there," Dodson said. "We serve all youth. There are opportunities for kids willing and mature enough to work. We try to let young people know there are many, many things out there they can do and serve as intermediaries for them."

"We respect kids and believe they have a lot to offer if it's asked of them," she added.

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