

Finishing touches

Claire Leonard's sixth-grade ballroom dancing students practiced the social graces at a recent soiree held at Seton Junior High School. See page 7.



Runaway refuge

Covenant House, the New York City-based network of shelters for street kids, now offers a toll-free hotline designed to nip the runaway crisis in the bud. See page 16.

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Children of Haiti share joy of resurrection from despair

Penfield parish hosts 18 former street kids

By Teresa A. Parsons

Michael Geilenfeld has dedicated the past two years to saving Haiti's children, one at a time.

Barring any unforeseen circumstances, the 35-year-old Iowa native plans to spend the rest of his life at the same task.

Last Friday, he visited St. Joseph's Church in Penfield to introduce the fruits of his loving work and the parish's generosity — 18 boys whose lives have been resurrected from the desolate slums and detention centers of Port-au-Prince, Haiti.

Fittingly, they call themselves the Resurrection Theatre Company of Haiti. Using English words and songs that still sounded foreign even after 90 performances, the boys told their story — of being robbed on the street and learning to steal, of going to jail and later to "Michael's House," which is also known as St. Joseph's Boys' Home.

Their messages, delivered in sweet-Creole accents and lifting Caribbean rhythms, was that life itself, however impoverished by American standards, is reason to rejoice.

When Geilenfeld and his budding showmen set out from Florida three months ago in a colorful, ramshackle old bus, their mere presence in the United States seemed little short of miraculous.

Since then, they have traveled 11,000 miles across 10 states, driving north to Missouri, where they saw snow for the first time, then west to Iowa and Minnesota. Turning east, they stopped in Pennsylvania, where the bus suffered its only breakdown. The troupe moved on in a rented van until the bus was fixed, visiting Massachusetts, New Hampshire, Connecticut and New York City before heading for their final destination in Rochester.

All along the way, the group sang and performed for friends — some who had visited and worked at St. Joseph's Home in Haiti, and others who had supported them with letters, donations and prayers.

Once the theater tour ended in Rochester, a dozen of the boys returned to individual families throughout the country with whom they planned to stay until their visas expire in September. Geilenfeld, along with six others, returned to Haiti.

Their American hosts graciously showered the visitors with every imaginable gift and opportunity. But Geilenfeld said the boys had just two rather odd requirements for the trip.

"They wanted to see where poor people lived here, and they wanted to see a juvenile detention center," he said. "I think it's because that's what people want to see when they come to (the boys') country."

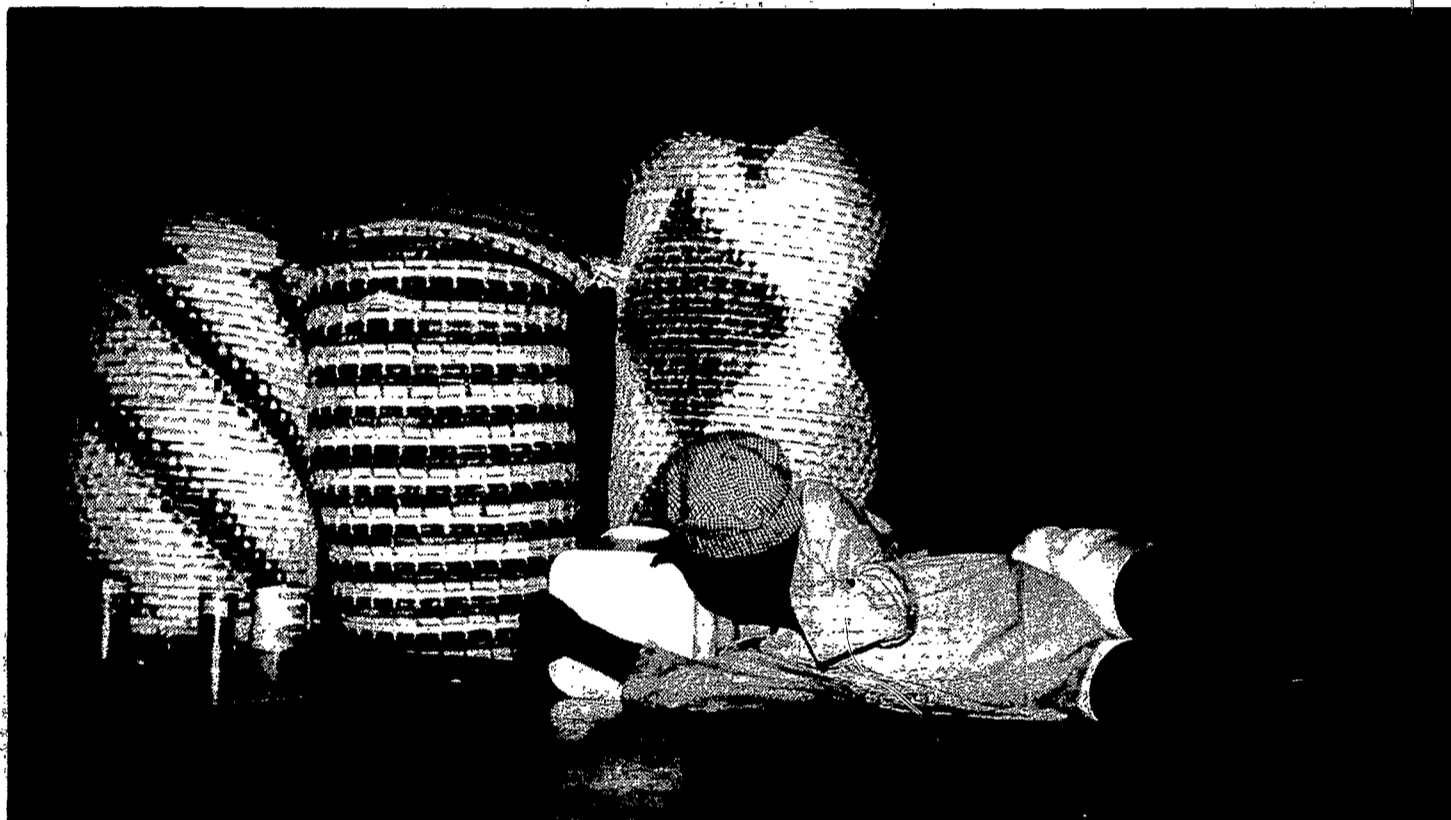
Geilenfeld organized the tour, at least in part, to prove a point to the boys. "We're always saying to them 'anything is possible,'" he said. "Everybody told us that going to the United States was impossible . . . I wanted them to see that it is good to dream, and that with God, all things are possible."

Making the arrangements did prove difficult, but he persisted with the hope that he could show donors what their dollars and prayers have accomplished.

"I wanted them to see that these were not bad kids," he said. "They had just never been given a chance."

At the same time, Geilenfeld believed that the reaction of American audiences would raise the boys' self-esteem.

"On the streets, they were always given a negative self-image. People were always chasing them away," he explained. "When they hear



Jeff Goulding/Courier-Journal

Using a touch of humor to soften the biting edge of truth, members of the Resurrection Theater Company of Haiti related the story of their own struggles to survive on the streets of Port-au-Prince. The play they wrote, entitled "Rue Soleil," means "sunshine street." Eighteen boys from St. Joseph's Home for Boys in Port-au-Prince presented their play to more than 200 parishioners at St. Joseph's in Penfield.



Evans Edmond, left, portraying a policeman, questions "robber" Marceau Kepal, who is acting like a statue in order to avoid capture.



Two boys gang up on a vendor (Dieu Donne Memnon) to rob "her" of her money.

people applauding them and they see themselves on television and in the newspapers, it makes them feel good about themselves. When you make people happy and you know you're making them happy, you feel good."

Finally, the trip provided a chance for Geilenfeld and the boys to make Americans aware that the majority of Haiti's children have not been as fortunate as Americans have.

"This is their way of being the voice of the children who are still on the streets and in the detention center," he said. "It's their way of reaching back to where they were and helping other children to get to where they are now."

The tour has also raised some money, with which Geilenfeld hopes to pay off existing

debts and open a third small home for perhaps a dozen more boys.

Most of the children who live at St. Joseph's Home were born in the Haitian countryside. Some are orphaned, while others were brought to Port-au-Prince and abandoned by families unable to feed them.

Street kids are regarded as the lowest form of life in the city other than animals, Geilenfeld said. Those caught stealing or begging are sent to the city's youth detention center, which houses more than 400 children — each at a cost of just \$10 per month.

Abandoned children have long been Geilenfeld's special mission. During 11 years spent as a brother with Mother Teresa's Missionaries

of Charity, he worked with street children in Cambodia, Vietnam, Calcutta, El Salvador, Haiti and Los Angeles.

Earlier, he spent several years with a Franciscan order, but left to seek a simpler and more radical lifestyle. During a pilgrimage to Assisi, Italy, he learned about the Missionaries of Charity, met Mother Teresa and joined her order.

In 1984, Geilenfeld presented his fellow missionary brothers with an idea for establishing small, long-term, family-style homes for abandoned and homeless children. He was concerned that, because the brothers changed assignments every two years, they could not of-

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