



Covenant House offers nationwide hotline for runaways

By Teresa A. Parsons

It takes only a few weeks of living on the street before a teenager starts to die inside.

At least that's what Franciscan Father Bruce Ritter has observed, during 18 years of trying to infuse life and hope into thousands of runaway and "throwaway" kids exploited by pimps and pornographers in New York City's Times Square district.

"Three months on the street is a very long time," Father Ritter wrote to his supporters in a June, 1982, newsletter. "Six months is forever. A year? Then they're just breathing in and out, but dead inside.

"In the beginning they can still make distinctions between what they are inside their heads and what they do with their bodies," he explained. "But after 100 or 500 or 1,000 'johns,' it becomes difficult, and then impossible, to separate what you are from what you do. You become what you do. And you no longer care."

Few people know more about the fate of street kids than Father Ritter. They became "his kids" on a bitter-cold February night in 1969, when the former college professor and medieval theologian opened his apartment door to six homeless youths and thus founded Covenant House.

Father Ritter's personal crusade against the sexual exploitation of children and teenagers has expanded those first few makeshift beds in his East Village tenement building into multi-faceted child-care agencies in New York, Houston, New Orleans, Fort Lauderdale, Toronto and Antigua, Guatemala. Last year, these agencies offered programs for thousands of youths under the age of 21.

But the new programs and the added beds have never even kept pace with the numbers of those who need them. Licensed for some 130 emergency beds, New York City's Covenant House regularly accommodates more than 200 youths. The Covenant House shelter in Toronto, which opened with 30 emergency beds in 1982, housed an average of 80 youths each

night last winter.

Such expansion has consistently stretched Covenant House's funds — more than 90 percent of which come from private sources — to the limit. And as Father Ritter wrote in his annual report for 1986, Covenant House seems to have "cornered the market in street kids.

"As yet we have no serious competition," he wrote. "Our Coke has not generated its Pepsi." Meanwhile, Father Ritter's experience has shown that only about one-third of the street kids who pass the point of caring have a realistic chance of returning to another kind of life.

Both the limited resources available to serve an ever-increasing population of street kids and the urgency of reaching them quickly point to the need for preventive measures.

Already, Covenant House teams roam the streets of several cities at night in vans, looking for kids new to the street, handing out sandwiches and hot drinks to young hustlers and prostitutes, and trying to win their shattered trust.

But this fall, Covenant House will begin trying, even before teenagers leave home, to reach them with a new, nationwide, toll-free hotline, called the "9-line" — 1-800-999-9999.

John Kells, a staff member at the New York City facility, visited Rochester earlier this month to publicize the hotline. Of the more than 11,000 youths served last year at Covenant Houses in New York City and Toronto alone, he observed that hundreds came from upstate communities such as Rochester, Auburn, Elmira, Waverly, Cohocton, Macedon or Hornell. Some, feeling bored or neglected, dreamed of becoming instant actresses or millionaires. Others sought to escape troubled homes or alcoholic or abusive parents.

Kells and others at Covenant House hope that if upstate youths call the 9-line, they can be dissuaded or counseled before they end up selling themselves on 42nd Street in New York.

"With one centralized number, we can (immediately) connect kids to services where they

are, or wherever they're going," Kells said. "We've always been successful in getting kids off the street. Now we want to prevent them from running away in the first place . . . We'd love to put ourselves out of business."

Organizers are setting up a nationwide computer network of agencies, individuals and churches willing to provide shelter and other services to runaways. When the first caller dials the hotline number in October, a counselor should be able within minutes to consult a list of people and places that will offer emergency help in the caller's immediate area.

Kids and families don't have to be in the midst of a crisis to call the hotline, however. Counselors will also be available to talk, to mail out literature, or to make local referrals.

For many years, Covenant House has received calls from troubled teenagers seeking help and advice. Staff members in New York City began to seriously consider the need for a better-publicized and more secure phone number after a local pimp showed them how vulnerable their present call-in system could be.

Earlier this year, Kells said, a man called the headquarters of a New York City-based runaway hotline and gave operators there a new phone number for Covenant House. The man, who turned out to be a pimp, had runaways calling him directly while thinking they were speaking to someone at Covenant House.

To introduce the legitimate hotline number to potential runaways in cities and towns across the country, Covenant House has produced and distributed a 23-minute film entitled "The Hustler's Story" to more than 400 television stations throughout the country. The film, which relates the story of one 16-year-old's struggle to survive on the street, will be broadcast on WHEC, Channel 10, at 2 p.m. Saturday, June 27.

Besides creating awareness of the hotline, Covenant House staffers hope the movie will help educate youths and families about what runaways face, not only on the streets, but also regarding their own families.

When young people show up at a Covenant House facility, the staff's first goal is to return them to their homes. In an increasing number

of cases, however, parents or other relatives don't want them back.

"The biggest problem we have nowadays isn't runaways — it's throwaways," Kells said. "Kids are spun out by families that can no longer hold together."

At the same time, extended family members — uncles, aunts or grandparents — are no longer likely to be close enough, either geographically or emotionally, to provide a back-up system for children rejected by troubled families.

Even stable families sometimes reject a child who wants to return home after living on the streets. In particular, Kells said, families tend to view boys who've been involved in prostitution as somehow "soiled."

Covenant House offers to kids who cannot return home both educational opportunities and help in finding jobs and establishing an independent life. "But those kids are scarred in a way we can't even begin to touch," Kells said.

"We need to encourage families to think more about this problem," he added. "More than anything else, kids seek love. If you don't have time for your child, there are plenty of people who do."

Since most of the funding for Covenant House's new hotline and other programs comes from private sources, donations are always welcome. Covenant House is also looking for individuals, parishes and agencies willing to offer emergency services to runaways in their local communities.

Volunteers who are college-aged or older and who are willing to make a one-year commitment to live and work with Covenant House's lay religious communities are also needed. Room and board are provided, along with a small stipend.

For more information or to volunteer, call John Kells at (212) 330-0408 or write Covenant House at 460 W. 41st Street, New York, N.Y., 10036.