

Youths share Christmas at Industry

By Barbara Ann Homick
Staff writer

I was in prison and you came to see Me (Matthew 25:36).

INDUSTRY — Although the young men at the Industry School — a state facility for delinquent youths — are not technically in prison, they don't have the freedom to come and go as they please.

But when the youth group at St. Christopher's Church in North Chili visited one of the cottages at Industry on Dec. 14, 23 young men had what most teenagers would probably call a fun Friday night.

The 22 youth group members planned the party for several weeks. Under the guidance of youth minister Anne Capone, the group baked Christmas cookies and bought gifts for the young men. The school provided pizza and drinks for all the youths to celebrate Christmas in the cottage's recreation room.

Although St. Christopher's began the visitation program with Industry youths 13 years ago, last week's visit was the first for some of the young and apprehensive parishioners. It took some time for the two groups to break the ice and begin to mingle.

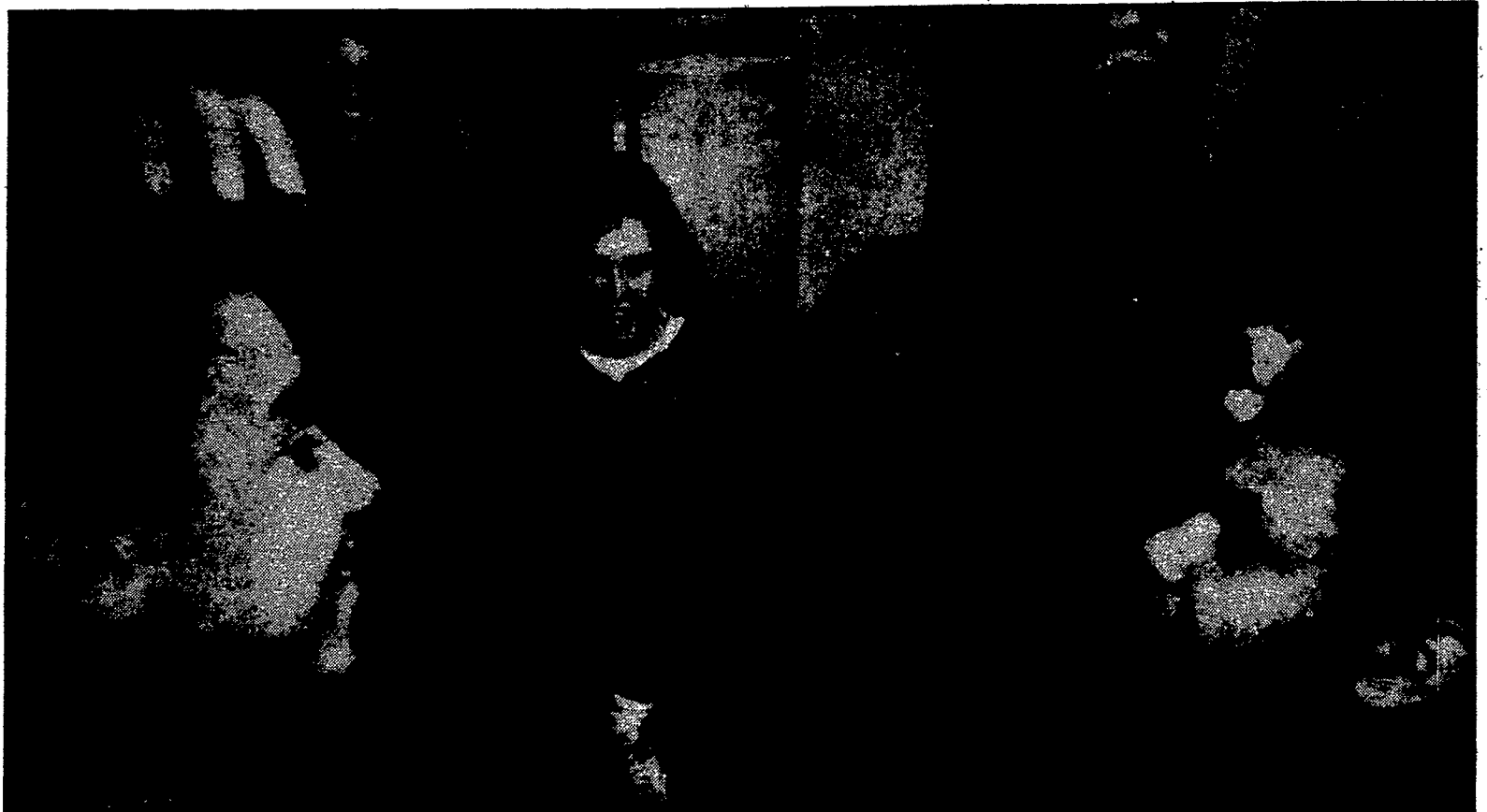
Soon after they arrived, however, youths began playing cards, pool and pingpong. Some watched music videos or listened to rap music. One young man had looked forward to the party so much that he took the night off from his job to attend the event.

"I was supposed to be working, but they said the church people were coming so I stayed," said 15-year-old "Tom," whose name has been changed to protect his identity.

"They give up their time to come visit us, but I gave up making \$5 to stay here," said Tom, who works in the school's gymnasium.

Tom said the youths at Industry don't get many visitors. "We don't see that many people ... or that many girls," he joked.

The youth has been serving an assault charge at Industry since last summer. He was charged with assault after hitting a 16-year-old boy with a baseball bat. Tom claims his 10-year-old sister was being molested by the boy. He is supposed to be released in January.



Babette G. Augustin/Staff photographer
Members of the St. Christopher's Church youth group in North Chili exchange tips on hairstyles during a Dec. 14 visit to one of the cottages at the Industry School — a state facility for delinquent youths. They are (clockwise from top left): Jenny Hayes, Kate Latacki, Laura Osborn, Nancy Osborn, "Eric" and "Michael."

Tom's term at Industry has given him lots of time to think. "You can look back and say 'I was kind of dumb,'" he reflected. But when faced with the decision to protect his little sister again, Tom said it would be tough to decide what to do.

Another young man, "Tony," commented that the youth group's visit made for a good time.

"They loosen things up a little. Otherwise we'd just be sitting around watching TV," Tony said.

Tony had a hard time approaching the girls from the youth group because he thought that others look at him as a criminal. He was quick to defend himself, however.

"I'm not a criminal at heart, I'm a loveable person at heart. But people don't see me that way," he said. "They are church people and I'm a criminal."

This Christmas will be Tony's first away from home. He has been at Industry since August, but he also spent 16 months in another facility for delinquent young men.

"I was at another place in Buffalo, but I wanted to go home so bad. So I left. It took them a few months to find me, but then they put me here because I was AWOL," Tony said.

The 17-year-old recently received his high school equivalency degree, and he works at the Industry library. Tony plans

to attend the State University College at Brockport when he leaves Industry.

Kate Latacki, a member of the youth group and a freshman at Churchville-Chili High School, said she can empathize with the young men.

"I'd hate to be away from home for Christmas," she said with a shiver. "Especially when you are locked in and can't do things."

Even though it was her first time at the school, Latacki thought the party was a great idea.

"It's a good experience because I'd expect these kids to be different, but they are normal," she commented.

Laura Osborn agreed with Latacki. "A lot of people don't know what goes on here. It's not part of our life," she said.

Osborn noted that the young men are just ordinary guys. "They aren't any different. If anything, they are more polite because they don't see us a lot," she said.

Although Osborn said she would feel awkward keeping in touch with any of the Industry youths, she knows of several youth group members who have become pen pals with some of the young men.

For instance, Laura Fullington, 14, and "Steve" — who is also 14 years old — met at Industry last month. After keeping in touch through letters, they had the chance to spend more time together at the Christmas party.

Although "Eric" doesn't write to anyone from the parish, the 15-year-old youth said he thinks it's great for people to visit the school. Although his mom and his

four sisters will be able to visit, Eric is expecting Christmas to be "crummy" this year.

Eric said the biggest lesson he has learned at Industry is to respect things he doesn't have now — like freedom.

"I also have to learn to listen to my mom more," he admitted.

And even though 16-year-old "Raphael" said he would much rather be home with his family at Christmas time, he said he now has a new family with his friends at Industry.

That circle of friends got bigger as the party continued. The youths started dancing to M.C. Hammer and Madonna. "Michael," 16, said he learned to dance in clubs back in Brooklyn.

Michael was sent to Industry last July on a charge of gun possession, which he said came from being in the "wrong place at the wrong time." Michael said he did not commit the crime, but had only taken the gun from a friend after a shootout just as the police arrived.

He said one good thing came out of his sentence in that he now had more self-control. According to one of the Industry counselors, Michael had been depressed because the school had been unable to locate his parents. The counselor noted that he hadn't seen Michael this happy in a long time.

Michael admitted that the party had lifted his spirits. "This is probably the best time I've had since I've been here," he said with a smile.



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A: _____

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