

# Troop offers refuge

Mike Latona/Catholic Courier

ROCHESTER — Gunshots are supposed to begin races, not Boy Scout meetings.

Then again, things don't always go according to script in 13-year-old Philip Maciuska's neighborhood, where disruption is commonplace and can carry the potential for tragic results.

Philip lives on Woodward Street, a few doors away from Our Lady of Mt. Carmel Church on the city's northeast side. The church houses a Boy Scout troop that Philip and his father, George, helped form earlier this year.

One evening over the summer, just as members of Otetiana Council Troop 444 were gathering outside prior to their weekly meeting, gunshots rang out from a nearby car. George Maciuska told the boys to take cover and then called 911; fortunately no one was hurt. It was later discovered that the shooting was drug-related.

Within weeks of that incident, Philip and a friend were walking to a store when other youths attempted to rob them in broad daylight. After a scuffle, Philip said, they emerged without major injury.

Philip's dad, a lifelong resident of the neighborhood, knows either of those incidents could have turned out much worse. "I've seen it all," said George Maciuska, 42. "Of the people who grew up here, half are dead or cracked out."

One place of refuge from this harsh existence is an ancient, unfurnished basement room at Mt. Carmel Church where Troop 444 meets on Wednesdays. At a recent meeting Philip, the patrol leader, got things started by leading the Pledge of Allegiance. "Hands over your hearts," he instructed. The six boys in attendance then went through the Scout Oath, prayer and minutes of the last meeting before discussing plans for upcoming activities.

Philip said it was the large volume of activities available that garnered his initial interest in Scouting last year. "They do a lot of outdoor stuff — put up tents, cook on a fire, learn to start a fire, learn about plants and animals," he said.

His father, who had led a Boy Scout troop at Mt. Carmel two decades ago, agreed to be Scout-



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Elvin Feliciano, 11 (from left), and 13-year-olds Philip Maciuska, Donte Powell and Josue Cornier say the Boy Scout Oath at the beginning of their Sept. 24 meeting at Our Lady of Mt. Carmel Church.

## Youth

master of the new coalition. He even discovered some old flags and camping gear from the long-defunct former troop that were still being stored at the church.

Although gatherings have been modestly sized thus far, Philip said his promotional efforts among his friends are yielding good results. "They're coming little by little. We just keep on spreading the word," said Philip, an eighth-grader at Marshall Regents Academy.

Philip said some peers have dropped out "because of school problems," and others never got started because they deemed Scouting "too kiddie-ish." He, in turn, said he attempts to persuade them by "telling them about all the events they could be going to, how it's good to keep you off the streets and keep you from getting into trouble."

Most of Troop 444's members are neighborhood youths who come from single-parent households. The group is ethnically and religiously diverse; Philip, whose family belongs to Mt. Carmel, is half Puerto Rican, one-quarter Italian and one-quarter Polish.

George Maciuska said Scouting can be valuable for inner-city youths not only because it teaches them discipline, but also for the exposure to a world they've never seen. Recently, Troop 444 enjoyed a camping trip to the Finger Lakes area. "Ninety

percent of them had never been camping before," Maciuska remarked.

According to Earl Knab, who chairs the Otetiana Council's Catholic Committee on Scouting, inner-city Scouting organizations are rare but important. Therefore he's putting in extra time helping get Troop 444 established; for example, he sought permission from Father Dennis Shaw, pastor of Mt. Carmel, to use the basement room.

"It still needs a little fixing up, but it's ours," said Knab, who also helped start a Cub Scout pack at the nearby House of Mercy, where he volunteers regularly.

Perhaps a bigger dilemma than securing a meeting place is the challenge of retaining members. "This is not going to be easy," said Knab, who said inner-city youths may attend an event or two and then "fall off the face of the earth." He said it's crucial for Troop 444 to recruit members in the age 12-13 range, before they're sucked up by the lure of the streets, and to swell the adult volunteer base as well.

Philip's dad said he's fond of Woodward and the surrounding streets, stating, "There are real good people here." Yet he said crime and violence have risen sharply in recent years, and for the good of his family he plans to move them to a property they own south of Monroe County by this summer. However, he and Philip emphasized that they plan to continue traveling into Rochester weekly to maintain their ties with Troop 444.



Philip Maciuska (left) and Joshua Ruiz, 11, lower the flag to be folded at the end of their Scout meeting. Scoutmaster George Maciuska told the boys that the flag must be respected and folded without touching the ground.

Philip admitted that he, also, could stand a change of scenery. "All the drug dealers by the stores, I get tired of seeing them," he remarked. "And there's guys rolling into garbage cans at 2 in the morning."

Citing his future goals, Philip said, "I want a good home, wife, kids." After a pause, he added, "And just a safe neighborhood."