

# Shelter provides alternative to street-life

by Ken Lenz

Built in 1905, the building at 9310 82 Avenue served as a fire hall for the Mill Creek area. But it wasn't much use as a fire hall. It was on the east side of the Mill Creek ravine, and the population was concentrated on the west side.

The city of Edmonton added another wing in 1949 and soon after the Salvation Army turned the building into a Single Men's Shelter.

The building was vacant for almost a decade, beginning in the early 1970's.

About two years ago the Youth Emergency Shelter Society (YESS) put about \$45,000 into renovations and turned the old fire hall into a refuge for homeless 16 and 17 year olds.

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Since then, the Society has put an additional \$100,000 towards upgrading the building and today it stands as a community service, picking up where other social service agencies leave off.

YESS is a non-profit charitable society that provides a short-term home for destitute youths - a group "historically without service."

At 16 years of age the Department of Social Services decides whether to turn youths out into the world, or to make them permanent wards of the state.

"What usually happens is that they tend to unload the kids with disciplinary problems, rather than trying to work with them," says Michael Farris, Executive Director of YESS.

"These kids are too young to go to the existing institutions, like single men's hostels," he says, "they usually have never had their problems addressed."

The youths are usually school drop-outs, have poor verbal skills, no family to fall back on, and no role models.

"They don't have the resources or support networks most people take for granted and this leads them to life on the street," says Farris. "At any one time there are between 800 and 1000 kids living on Edmonton's streets."

Without the resources to function normally in society, many of these youths turn to crime or prostitution. Over 40 per cent of parolees are under 20 and Farris says many of these are either runaways or throwaways - the two groups YESS deals with.

Throwaways are those kids with no options; they are either told to get out or the family dissolves and they have no place to go. With runaways, Farris says, "our first option of choice is family reconciliation, when possible. It is not often possible. At least half of the girls we deal with are victims of incest," he says.

The government almost completely neglects this "disenfranchised" group, though Mayor Laurence Decore personally endorses the shelter and Edmonton Chief of Police Robert Lunney says, "...the Shelter is providing a necessary social service," neither the City nor the Provincial Government is willing to

provide funding for YESS.

This neglect is forcing these youths to turn to the streets. They can only be put into an adult ward or a pediatric ward, and in the entire City of Edmonton there are 17 adult psychiatric ward.

This is cost inefficient, according to Farris. He says that while it costs YESS only \$30 a day to provide room and board it costs the hospitals about \$100 and much more to keep someone in a correctional institute.

"What they are doing is taking a massive number of people and putting them into situations where they are getting angrier and more frustrated," says Farris.

"What they have to do is redefine what their priorities are..."

Many of the "street-kids" that YESS is trying to deal with turn to prostitution. "The world of prostitution is intimately connected with drug use and characterized by violence," says Farris. However, he doesn't believe the youths are the right people to penalize for this crime.

"What we have to do is convince legislators and politicians that the perpetrators of these crimes are not the prostitutes themselves, but the people who buy their services."

The Youth Emergency Shelter divides its services into two parts: the live-in shelter program, and the night-by-night program. At the beginning of September 1983, after 17 months of operation, the shelter had handled over 850 youths in their live-in

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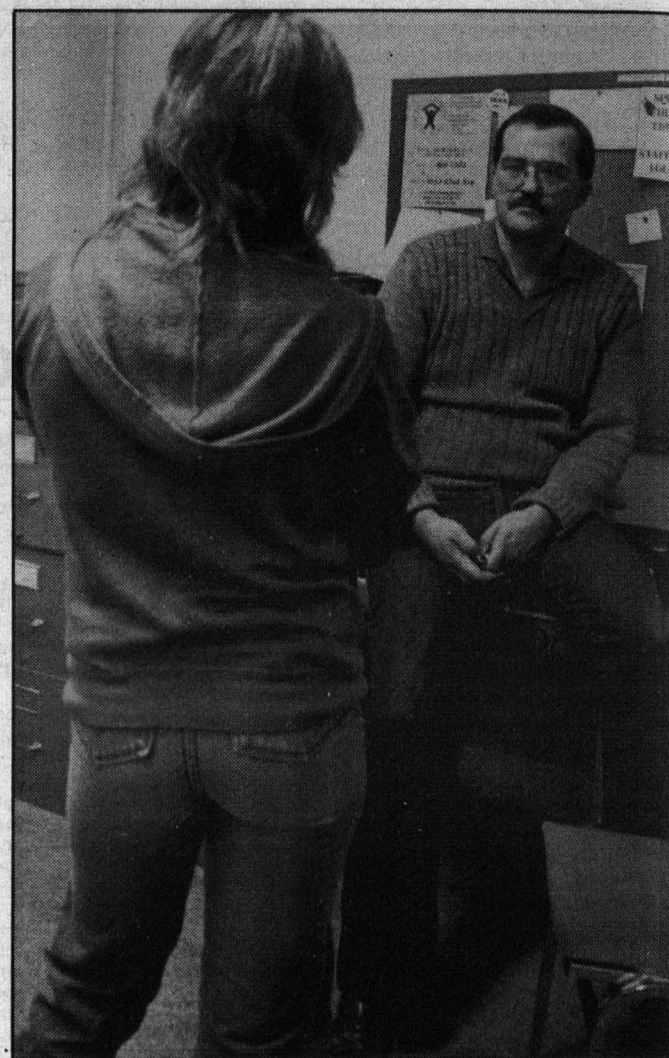
program. This service provides youths with temporary food and shelter as well as counselling and information about the resources available to let them "get on their feet again."

One of these programs is the Distinctive Employment Counselling Services of Alberta (DECSA). DECSA is a provincially funded program which attempts to provide basic job search skills, interview skills, and advice on how to hold a job.

This program is especially important in the current recession. Statistics Canada predicts almost one quarter of the people under 25 will be unemployed in the next three years. University students and graduates will be hit, women and tradesmen will be hit harder, but homeless youths will be the worst off.

"They don't have the same connections others have, whether through family or older friends," says Farris. "These kids haven't had the role models to follow and generally they are the least qualified - without education or stability."

The night by night program provides youth with a warm place to sleep as well as a hot meal and a bag lunch for the following day. They simply place mattresses on the floor in one big room, with clean sheets and blankets, to accommodate those who are not ready for the lifestyle change program.



YESS provides shelter and counselling for

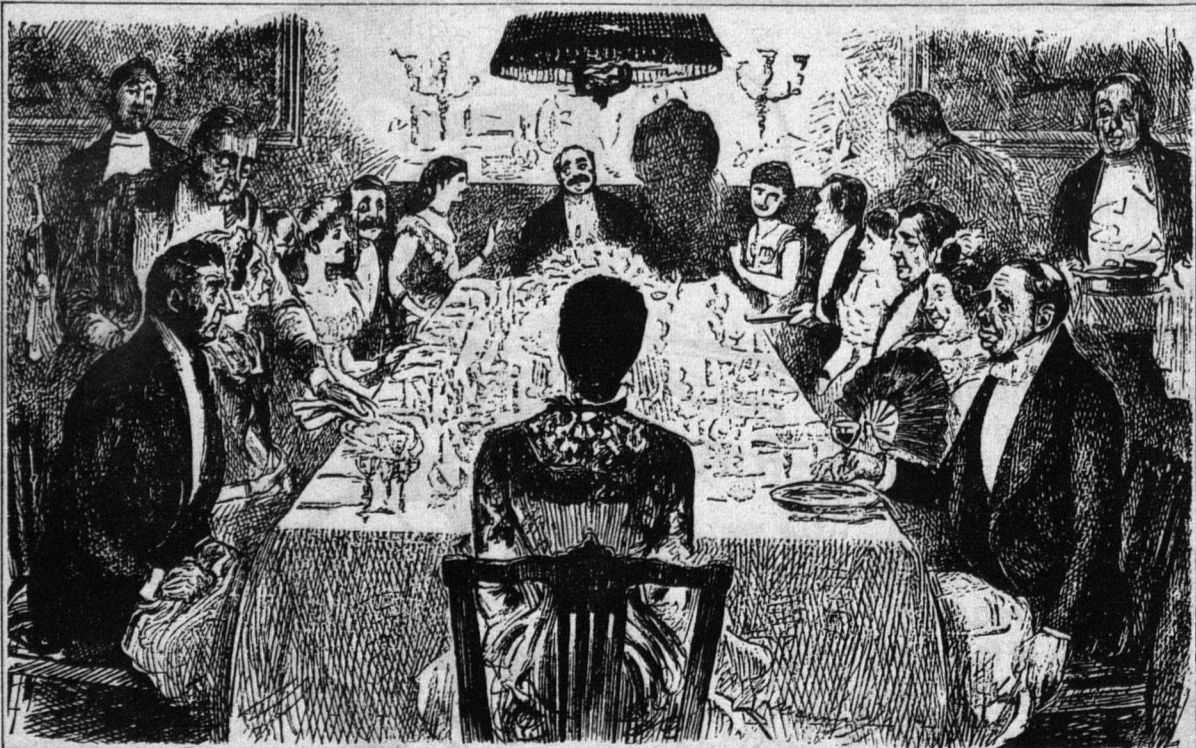
"We're the MASH unit... the kids come to us, we patch them up with resources, and then we send them out again. We do the best we can with the resources we have," says Farris.

Since the shelter is funded solely by donations, they are always in need of money. Money, however, is not the only thing. They need everything from canned food and powdered milk to clothing, bedding and furniture.

Volunteers are at the heart of the project. They are needed to cook, clean, paint, sew, launder, research, interact with residents and perform all of the other duties needed to keep the shelter running.

YESS admits that an emergency service won't solve all the problems faced by homeless youths.

"We walk down the street every day, and we see disadvantaged people every day, but we choose to ignore them," says Farris. "People are either repulsed or angry because these kids look 'tough' or 'dirty'. We want to try to open up a future for these teenagers."



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