

Operation Go Home — Reason for Hope

by Karen Dover

"I want to go back home . . . to Argentina." He is 27 and disillusioned in his dreams of instant prosperity in the city streets.

"My boyfriend threw me out . . . I'd like to talk to my Mom out west . . ." She's 13-and-a-half years old and pregnant.

"We think our daughter may be in Toronto . . . Canada . . ." They are middle-aged, from Pennsylvania, and just want to know that their 17-year-old girl is alive and safe.

"My son was seen on an OC Transpo bus heading downtown. He looked awful. I have to help him . . . tell him he can come home to us."

She did a few tricks and didn't like herself any longer. She slashed her wrists in a corner of a basement parking garage. She was dirty and 13 years of age. She was found by security guards just before it was too late.

Operation Go Home, founded by Reverend Norman Johnston in Ottawa, Ontario has a well-defined mandate. Primarily, the program is to provide the necessary link between dejected teenage runaways and their families. The kids who are ready to come to Operation Go Home on their own have realized that life "out there" isn't all it's cracked up to be. Sometimes they know they want to go home. Sometimes they don't know where their next steps should take them. Sometimes they need someone to call Mom and Dad just to test the atmosphere back home. And other times,

if returning home is out of the question, they know they're ready for a home-like atmosphere and education, or job training.

A modest beginning

These are the kids the Rev. Johnston saw on Ottawa streets in (and before) 1971, when he started trying to send them back home. Word on the streets travels fast and loud. Everyone out there is plugged into the "network" somewhere, somehow. It's easy to find what you're looking for, or what you want to stay away from when you're living among street people. You trust each other — at first. A lot of older street people don't encourage the youngsters to stay; it's a personal choice. But the veterans know what could have been, had their decisions been different, earlier in life. Johnston knew that, and banked on it. That's how Operation Go Home got its start — a fizzle-start in the lives of most Ottawa residents — but most of them don't live on the streets.

Johnston talked to school kids, because teenagers in school have always frequented some of the same places as the drop-outs and the runaways. On one hand, this had the effect of heading off the problem before it got underway; on the other, these "good kids" also talk to those on the street for their own reasons. Some of the information picked up made its way back to Johnston. Truck drivers were enlisted, provided with photos of missing kids, and asked to keep open eyes and ears while travelling on the