

Rivendell A 'Family' That Rescues Youthful Offenders

By WALLACE WOOD
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Baby-faced burglars. Little-girl prostitutes. Child killers. Boy robbers.

Age doesn't matter. The ugly life starts young for a few of the millions of young people in our country.

You can be convicted of first degree murder at 16.

Where do they go? Where does a court send someone hardly old enough or smart enough to even spell the name of their crime? What does "society" do with its sick little minds and bodies?

There's no sure answer; no way to be certain an Edmund

Kemper who killed his grandparents won't grow up to kill many more people.

But people keep trying, and now and then find something that works for awhile, that helps some of the lost, flailing teenagers buy time to grow up and try again to live like human beings.

"We get the kids nobody else wants and nobody else can handle," said Tony Hill, a young, intense black man. "We try to help, but it's up to them. What we really do is give them a place to live and belong, so they don't feel they're surrounded by an enemy world."

The name for that place is perfect: Rivendell, the legend-

ary sanctuary for the adventurers of J.R.R. Tolkien's "Lord of the Rings" trilogy: "Merely to be there was a cure for weariness, fear and sadness."

The place may not be so ideal. The Rivendell Foundation rents five houses in the Aptos area, spending \$42,000 last year to house its youthful charges. The foundation is trying to raise funds for a large, permanent ranch on Freedom Boulevard.

Largely funded by the California Youth Authority, Rivendell is one of the few places the CYA can send young offenders when they have served

enough "time" in CYA camps for probation.

"For a lot of these kids, there's no place to go to, no home, no family, nothin'," says Hill. "Or if they've got a family, they're better off staying away from them."

What kind of kids? Well, there's a 16-year old blond young man who could be the boy next door. He's had 30 unsuccessful "placements", from foster homes to boys' ranches, group homes and juvenile halls. He's been "into" burglary for fun and profit since he was 11, having learned it from "the older burnouts" at juvenile hall.

Another, call him John, killed his father. Then there is George, who ran down his girlfriend in a car. But there also is a young man who was diagnosed as psychotic (though he committed no crime), but found to have severe diabetes.

What Rivendell offers is a kind of home life — an "extended family" of about 26 adults and 12 young live-ins under court direction at present.

There's a school, called "Monday" school because that's the day of the weekly group meeting. The rest of school includes work experience at a print shop called "Our Print Shop," and part-time work at Donovan's Restaurant in Aptos Village under a contractual arrangement. Rivendell has offices in the Aptos Village center.

The ratio of 26 adults to 11 young people seems high. But the larger story is that many of the adults are former Rivendell referrals themselves. They have stayed on as "family" and continue to live and work in the community of people.

Rivendell has been here two years. It started eight years ago in one of the roughest sections of Los Angeles, with Hill, Maureen McDonald, and Fred (Freddy) Venegas working with juvenile offenders in what is called in the business a "residential treatment facility." The facility was run by a supposedly non-profit corporation, which Hill said was "ripping off" the operation by paying its officers high salaries and expenses.

The staff workers exposed the situation; there was a confrontation and "they closed the place down. We were out of a job and we had 45 kids with no place to go."

Some of the staff moved in together, dedicated to their young charges, and found the "extended family" idea worked better than other methods of dealing with teenagers with torn lives.

They don't call themselves "staff" anymore "because the kids don't like it — it sounds institutional," said Hill. They are known as "more responsible members" of Rivendell, suggesting a rise in the family hierarchy that does, in fact, take place.

These older family members know something about the streets, as well as some of them holding the necessary degrees in counselling, psychology, and so on. "Freddy and I grew up together on the streets of New York," said Hill. "We got involved in drugs and the protest movement and we know what's going on."

With them in L.A. was Allen Bayer, a doctor, who came along when it became clear "Los Angeles was no place to raise kids" two years ago.

"Usually, it is some traumatic experience that results in and emotional and physical breakdown," said Bayer. "I don't believe in mental breakdowns."

"My approach and my function is to see the physical problems are managed. I believe that psychosis and much criminal behavior results from severe stress," he said.

"Normal psychiatric treatment does not offer people the opportunity to get well. It's good enough for people who are neurotic, but when you're dealing with these kids, you are talking about severely disabled people."

"I'll leave it to your imagination how I or any other psychiatrist can make anyone well by a one-hour-a-week counseling session. Or five hours a week. You've got to do more than that."

He concludes that "in order to be well, you have to have a functioning family life — and I don't just mean your mom and dad, but your family of friends and coworkers and lovers and other people you know. You've got to have a life you can live and function in in a healthy way."

Hill's view is that young people get lost "because our institutions, our traditions, are breaking down: family, schools, the whole process of life. There's no security any more. It used to be that if you go to college, you were guaranteed a job. No more. That's why so many kids stay loaded (on alcohol or drugs) all the time."

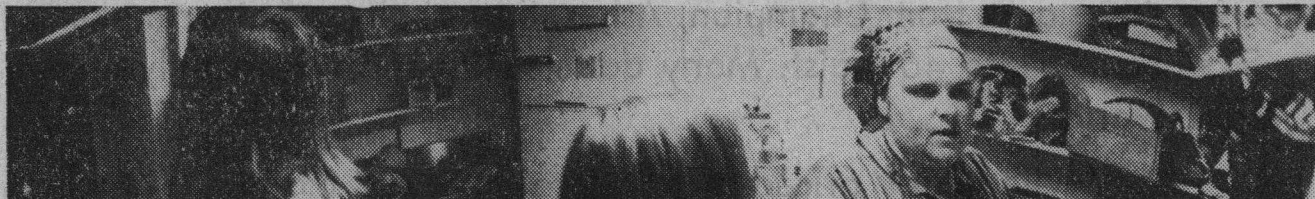
That's why almost all the young charges at Rivendell are from out-of-county: to get them away from the places they grew up in, the lives that were nightmares.

One young man, the one who ran down his girlfriend, finally wound up bringing his mother and brother to Rivendell, helping himself by helping them find a new life, too.

Rivendell may not be the only answer: there are other programs for youthful offenders. But Hill claims that "most of the time, these kids go through a courtordered program and go from place to place. Here, they stay on. They are part of the family."



Ron Henry kicks back in his new home





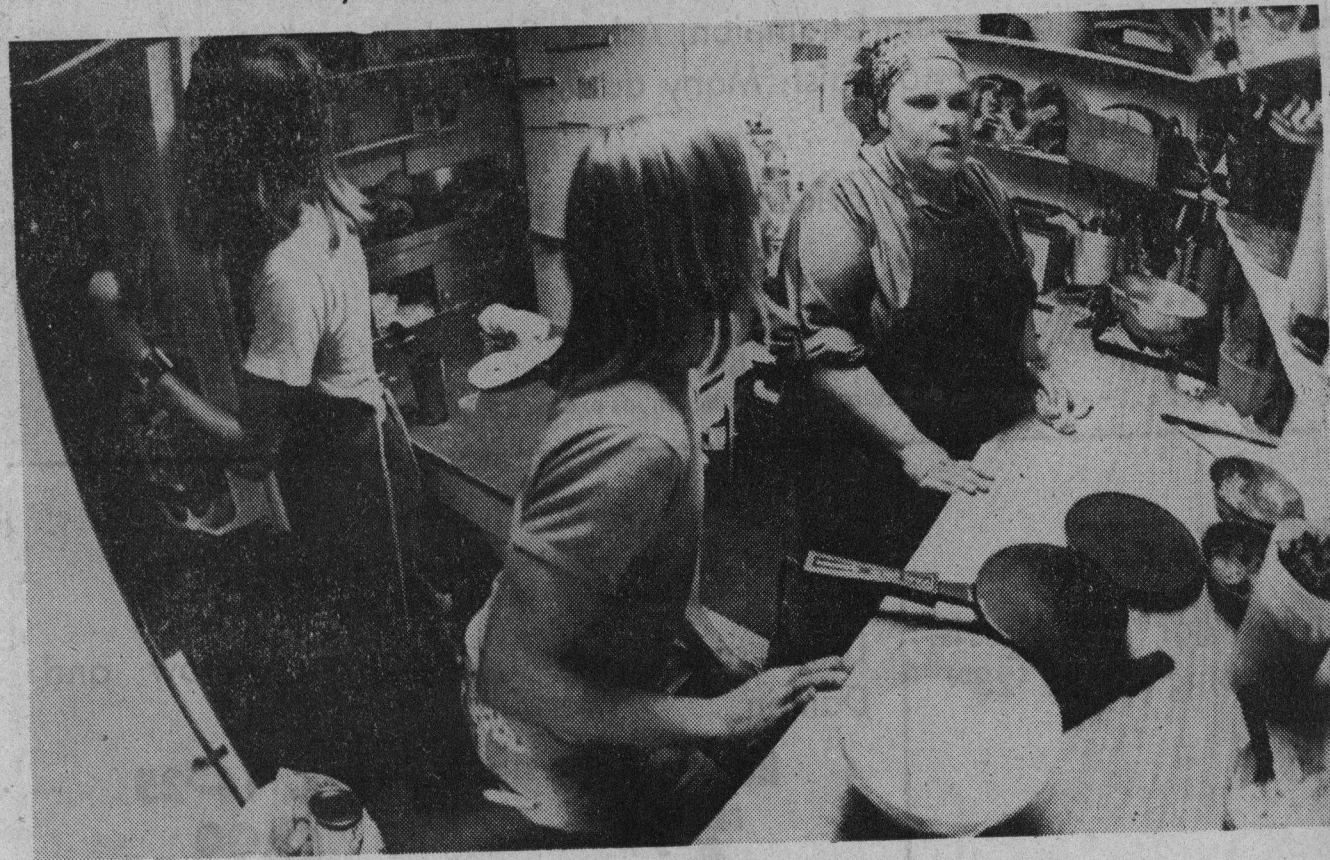
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Debra Jordan supervises preparation of family dinner